Draco Malfoy and the Heir of Slytherin

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Draco Malfoy and the Heir of Slytherin

by starbrigid

Summary

Draco Malfoy never asked for a second chance, nor did he particularly want one. But he found himself in his old body at eleven, and after a year at Hogwarts, he has a plan for the year before him: keep to himself, find Dobby, improve relations with fellow Slytherins to cordial but distant, get over this stupid obsession with Harry Potter, and no more jokes about controlling a Malfoy mountain troll. No one else thinks they're funny. And no more cursing people- well, only as many people as necessary...

Draco Malfoy has never been very good at following plans.

Notes

Hi everyone! Thanks for reading the first part! As in the first book, warning here for violence and prejudice, and references to abuse and sex acts, as well as very poor self-esteem on Draco's part. My favorite character should be pretty obvious ^^ but I love all the characters, and there is no character-bashing intended, except for when Draco's perspective is a very limited one. We only see what he sees. He will frequently misjudge situations, and attribute motivations to other people or even himself that are totally inaccurate. I suppose that's... er... part of his charm? I love him tons :((((

Anyway, I hope you will all enjoy the second book of this time travel series! The plan is to update every other day again. Thanks so much for all your comments on the first book! I really love hearing everyone's thoughts and questions and theories for what's coming :)

By the way, Draco will be calling Percy Peter for some time. This is a Draco thing. Such is his nature.

Here is a playlist that I will be updating with a song for each chapter.

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 德拉科马尔福与斯莱特林继承人 by Asuka041942

Learned Helplessness

It took an entire hall worth of stuffy blond paintings screaming *Filthy Mudblood* before Hermione would accept that Malfoy Manor had no paintings of Salazar Slytherin. "But in your father's Howler," she kept saying, and Abraxas Malfoy kept trying to interrupt and counter Draco's arguments as Draco explained it was an affectation of Father's, nothing more.

"I have a lot of ancient blood," Draco told her, "But none of the founder of Slytherin."

"The founding of Hogwarts is so fascinating," Hermione said brightly, only for Abraxas Malfoy to insert himself again.

"You should never have been allowed to set foot in the hallowed halls of Hogwarts, you disgraceful mutt," he snarled at Hermione.

"Shut it, Grandpa," said Draco.

He led Hermione out of the portrait hall, and back outside to where two brooms awaited them: Draco's old Comet 260 for Hermione, and his new Nimbus 2001 for himself. Hermione had laughed herself silly imagining Ron's jealousy when he saw it, only for Draco to tell her how he'd had to talk Father out of buying the entire Slytherin team the same. The Nimbus did roar rather more quickly into the sky than the school brooms, like the contrast between his own unicorn wand and the talon wand in his pocket now. It reassured him that he would be able to satisfy Father by making it onto the Slytherin team through tryouts like everyone else.

And he would have a better broom than Potter this year, not that it would make a difference. Potter would get his Firebolt in third-year anyway, and he'd be a better flier than him with or without it. Draco kept dreaming about Harry Potter flying. Sometimes it was in Quidditch matches, with Hogwarts and its bright streaming banners a wash of color behind him in the sunlight. And sometimes it was night, gliding more sedately through masses of shadow, brilliant green eyes turned guilelessly to whoever it was had won the right to be by his side...

Yes, it would only be Draco's broom upgraded this time around. He wouldn't have had any compunctions letting Father buy his way onto the team again, but the amount it would upset Hermione made it not worth the nagging. Not to mention the additional animosity that would fuel towards him in Potter, which Draco justified fearing on the grounds he was above squabbling with children. And so Father had agreed to let him play Quidditch his way, and withdrawn his offers of assistance with an exasperated but accepting scowl.

That had been part of their deal: tolerance of his one Muggleborn friend, countenancing post and visits, in exchange for obeying Father and playing for Slytherin that year, despite being set against it. They'd gone back and forth for weeks before coming to a compromise, aided by Draco's determination not to allow Father in a five-foot radius of him, and raising his wand whenever Father seemed likely to try and lay hands on him.

He kept Severus's words about using Langlock in mind, but only had to use it once. After the arrival of a third letter from Hermione, Father had tried to drag him to the cellars like he used

to. Draco had cast Langlock hard enough to send Father clattering down the stairs. He had expected the beating of his life, but he had managed instead to extract some guarantees in exchange for lifting the curse. Apparently Father did value the use of his tongue. If Draco had invented some alleged atrophying consequences in the event of no swift reversal, well, that was Father's own poor sense falling for it.

In return, Draco's first official concession had been one he was hardly heartbroken to grant: a solemn vow for no post or visits with the one species Father hated more than any Muggleborn or Muggle in the country: a Weasley.

Hermione let out an astonished gasp and slowed when they flew over a knot of albino peacocks, clustering around a garden snake they were hunting. "They're so pale!" she squealed.

"Didn't you see them on the way in?" Draco laughed, circling back around to her side. "See, they're nasty old buggers, aren't they? I'll have to show you some scars I have from them." Those were the most prominent scars still, it turned out, on this innocent 12-year-old body. And he had seemed to gain enough ground with Potter in first year that Draco doubted he would be so ready to catch Sectumsempra on him. If he did, he would have to face the wrath of Hermione.

"Do you think they differ as much from non-magical peacocks as Crups do from non-magical canines?" she asked, and Draco yawned and shrugged.

"Ask Hagrid," Draco said. "He wanted to hear all about the animals on the Manor. You can tell him about it."

Ron would never set eyes on these albino peacocks, Draco had resolved, at least until seventh year when Snatchers would bring Potter's trio here captive. If the blue loop of his old memories held this time around. Dobby's failure to reappear or even get into touch had made him progressively more uneasy, to the point that he had enlisted Hermione to help him search the Malfoy library for information on house elves. She was eager to help, and seemed as though she could have gladly spent every remaining moment before the Hogwarts Express departed exploring all of their ancient books. At least that helped lend credence to his claims to his parents that Hermione was not his friend, only his study partner.

Hermione had to be told twice before she would follow for a swoop around their largest fountain, her slowness making Draco spell upwards water from it to splash her on her broom. He managed to catch her, but Hermione's retaliation caught him in turn. Since she'd found out the Trace didn't work at the Manor, she had been using magic every chance she could get.

She was awed by the hedges as much as the peacocks, asking all kinds of intrusive questions about the history and wards. Draco would never have answered them if he had any intention of ever being on the opposite side of her. Yes, he was planning to take the passive approach to the future in the coming years, to adhere to his memories and repeat the steps that had led to Potter's victory the first time. But he nourished a selfish and probably naive hope that he could keep his family out of the line of fire this time. Or if not, then him and Mother.

And Severus too. Draco had not yet reconciled himself to the realization that the passive approach would mean allowing his godfather's death again.

Draco's frequent attempts to correspond with Severus had been met with curt missives in return. But Severus *had* sent more than a few books over the break, which at least from Hermione would have been a sign of far more affection than mere words.

A potential enemy would never have showed Hermione the back entrances of the Manor as well as the front ones. But off they flew, summer sunlight streaming down over them, with a gentle breeze keeping them from overheating. "This part is like the labyrinth halls in the dungeons of Hogwarts," Draco pointed out, enjoying listening to her ooh and ah at the sight of all of the gilded edging and gargoyles, stained glass and crenellations, ancient stone and enchanted hovering ocean-colored lights, which all came to life at an earlier time each night once they passed the solstice.

Hermione had told him Muggles had a thing called streetlights, which also lit up on their own when the sun had set a certain amount. That was rather disgruntling. But when he brought her up here the first night to watch them turn on, she made quite a spectacle squealing over them, and declared that the lights of Draco's family were far more beautiful.

She only saw the dining room of Draco's family in passing, as Father had forbidden her from meals, withdrawing to his study whenever she approached. It was a snubbing honestly more gentle and circumspect than Draco had been expecting. It still seemed to annoy Hermione, to have Draco's father continually pretend she didn't exist. At least Mother was more friendly, having Hermione to tea once in her sitting room on the first afternoon. Granted, she had forbidden Draco from attending with them, so she could interrogate Hermione alone. And she had spent the rest of Hermione's visit avoiding her, albeit more gracefully than Father. But at least she had acknowledged Hermione's presence, though that acknowledgment had come with a grilling that Hermione proclaimed nearly as terrifying as her Defense Against the Dark Arts exam.

She could only say Mother was frightening because she had literally not laid eyes on Father.

Mainly, like tonight, they kept to themselves, dividing their time between the library, flying, Draco's room, and down in the kitchens with the house elves, whom Hermione had taken quite a shine to. One of them had started to tell her the story about Dobby and Draco's wand before he could snap at her to shut up, but she didn't get far enough to give anything away. Hermione's reaction when Dipsy began to beat her head against the oven for displeasing Master Draco was a thing to behold. She began afterwards to talk so indignantly about the freedom house elves deserved that it was a positive blessing Draco's parents were avoiding her.

"You just don't understand these things, Hermione," Draco groaned, watching her get more and more frustrated, as her attempts to speak to the elves about the prospect of their emancipation were met with more and more frightened avoidance. "To them, the idea of being freed is the worst punishment imaginable. Worse probably than death. It's like you're threatening them with the guillotine. They'll all be relieved once you're gone, and whisper tales to frighten each other about the Muggleborn girl who mercilessly threatened them."

"This is so backward!" Hermione fumed, carrying up the extra basket of pastries from the kitchen that three petrified elves had forced on her as they left the kitchens. Draco hoped she understood they were an attempt to appease the stranger terrorizing them, and not some covert mark of approval for her talk of revolution. "Why should they *want* to work without pay? Are there no other options for them in the wizarding world?"

"Hermione, their magic is tied to their masters," Draco sighed, and watched her flop down on his bed and hug Imoogi to her chest with a very pre-teen petulance. "There's a magical contract involved. Severing it damages them on a level you can't see. It's not as simple as just walking away and going somewhere else. And freed elves have trouble finding other masters." He winced thinking of Dobby, hoping they would go back to school only for him to find Dobby there right away, happily darting about the kitchens spreading sedition amongst the Hogwarts elves. "I could free them all if I wanted, you know. It would be easy. Have you wondered why they wear such ugly scrounged-up clothes, when my family is so rich? It's not simply cruelty. The gift, intentional or not, of any clothes from the hand of their master will free them." He sighed at her excited look. "*Only* the family that they're bound to, Hermione, not anyone else, so you can stop plotting."

"But *you* could," Hermione persisted. "Oh, you should free them, Draco, why won't you?"

"Have you been listening to a word I said?" Draco groaned. "Rather than being so self-righteous, Hermione, try thinking about what *they* would want. They would rather I march down and start shooting off Avada Kedavras at all of them, sooner than throwing *socks*."

"Avada Kedavra," Hermione said slowly. "That's one of the Unforgivable Curses, isn't it? The Killing Curse? You're saying they'd really rather die?" She still seemed unconvinced. "If they do think that way, Draco, it's probably just because they've been conditioned to, and they don't know any other life. They don't think it's possible, so they don't even try. That part is called learned helplessness, I read about it in a book. People only know the lives they're used to. Just like you. The elves have been taught their place is to be slaves, and you were taught the place of purebloods is to rule over people like me. Doesn't anyone just, you know, *stop* thinking that way?"

Draco shifted uncomfortably. "It's not like I've never met an elf who wants to be free," he admitted, and rued it when he saw the light that put in her eyes. "But it's rare. And maybe an elf who doesn't want to serve without pay shouldn't have to, but there would need to be another structure in place for them to go to, or they just wouldn't belong anywhere anymore-"

"Why wouldn't other wizards take them in and pay them for their work?"

No wonder she had started that ridiculous SPEW in fourth year, if no one had ever bothered to explain all this to her properly. He'd had a good idea of all this since before he could walk. "Because house elves can see *everything*. Their magic is different, they can Apparate everywhere, do things even wizards can't. And Wizarding families are very secretive. Mine is not the exception. Unless an elf is magically bound to a family, where the magic keeps them from speaking ill against that family even if they wanted to, no wizard rich enough to have a servant would want one, paid or not, who he couldn't trust not to spill his secrets."

"But isn't the problem there," Hermione argued, "The distrust of the wizards, rather than anything untrustworthy in the nature of house elves?"

Draco flopped backwards onto his bed, letting his head fall back against the pillows with a groan. "Merlin, you do my head in, Hermione. Someday, when you're older, maybe you could do something to change things, but not now- any changes would have to come through legislation, and you wouldn't want to start with pushing emancipation, almost no one wants that, masters *or* elves. If you want to help them, you'd start with working to grant elves rights at all, like protections from certain punishments or working conditions, or the right to self-determination if they wanted it."

Hermione lay back beside him, and he began to play with the turquoise charms on the bracelet on her wrist. He felt an uncomfortable warmth in his chest at the sensation of comfort beside her, one he had never felt with his peers, even Vince or Greg or Theo. She might, he had come to realize over the course of her visit, be the first and only real friend he had ever had.

"You're so clever, Draco," she said, and he made sure to roll his eyes at her rather than letting himself look touched. "Maybe some change is more likely if it happens gradually. But I wish there was something I could do now, for any elves who do wish to be free. And I think more would be if there were other options, like you said, and they had a chance to learn something else and think differently. Before I got my Hogwarts letter, I never wanted to be a witch, because I never knew it was possible, you know?"

"It's so annoying," Draco sighed, "How much more time I've had with magic than you..." She had, in fact, no idea just how much, with Draco having recently turned simultaneously 19 and 12. "And yet you still got top of the year and not me."

"You should have spent more time with me revising for History of Magic," she said primly. "If you did still have those prejudices, Draco, that should have quite hurt, scoring that much worse than a Muggleborn on *your own* history." She started to giggle at the cross look he gave her. "Don't worry, I won't remind your parents. Your mother was already shocked to see the bracelet you made me. Why didn't you tell me it was a replica of hers? She went and got the original to show me."

"You really think I could have designed that on my own? Well, great," Draco muttered. "Just great. Now you can see what it was supposed to look like and how shoddy it is."

Hermione lifted the bracelet up in the air again appreciatively. "I think mine is more interesting and eye-catching than your mother's, honestly. But please don't tell her I said that."

"I don't tell my mother anything anymore," Draco sighed, and Hermione propped up her chin on her hand.

"You really don't, do you?" she sighed. "Remember the look on her face when she came into your room and saw us lying on your bed together? She really doesn't believe you're gay, does she?"

Draco grinned smugly. "I *was* clever convincing them of that. All I had to do was tell them it was a malicious rumor spread by Seamus Finnigan for being better than him in Potions, and that I didn't work harder to dispel it because I was only 11, and it's years till I'll have to secure a good pureblooded marriage match. And that it helped keep people from thinking I was dating you, because you're a girl- which of course, I'm not, because you're not my friend, you're my study partner, who I'm using to help me study, because..."

"Because you're going to become an Unspeakable," Hermione filled in obligingly.

"And I haven't changed my mind a bit about Muggleborns and the importance of blood purity, you and that brain of yours are just the rare exception that proves the rule, and I still don't think any other Muggleborn is worthy. And I only stand up against people calling you a Mudblood because rudeness to a known public associate of a Malfoy is a slight I cannot countenance, for the sake of our family name."

A shadow of doubt crossed Hermione's face that he hadn't wanted to put there. "None of that is true, right, Draco? That's just all a story you made up to appease your father. You don't really still believe in pureblood supremacy."

Draco wasn't quite sure what he believed on the topic, to be honest, even now. He knew that he didn't think the way he had used to about Hermione, but in general, his opinions were only truly clear on what he thought of the noseless wonder who had risen to power with that set of ideologies as a pretext, and the misery that association had wreaked on his family. That, he wanted out of the world without question. "Of course not," he lied, and took Imoogi's long red and green flared tail and began to poke her with it.

The trouble with having Hermione at Malfoy Manor was that eventually, he was expected to make a reciprocal visit. The Floo took him to Diagon Alley, but after that, he was on his own. No adults to take him to Muggle London, or to protect him from the savage Muggles once he went wandering out amongst their kind. The only Muggle he had ever spoken to at length was Potter's purple-faced uncle, who had been singularly unpleasant enough for Draco to threaten with his signature curse, Langlock. But Draco couldn't go about threatening every Muggle the same way, much as it would be easier to.

So he stashed his robes in his suitcase, and put on the Muggle hoodie Hermione had given him for Christmas. When he had been so unfortunate as to receive it, he had never thought he would be faced with the further indignity of actually having to wear the thing, and yet here he was. He checked his wand to make sure it was out of sight but still at the ready, and headed through the Leaky Cauldron to emerge out into the untamed wild, full of wandering purple-faced behemoths and eyesore skyscrapers and cars-

Cars!

Draco sprung back as one nearly hit him, with a jarring explosion of honking soon following from not just the one that had almost caught him, but spreading around several nearby. Draco stepped back onto the walkway gingerly, heart pounding at breakneck pace- to think of surviving Voldemort and Azkaban and being killed by a *Muggle*- and made sure he was

completely out of their asphalt-paved driving range, but that meant he was left standing on the sidewalk with his bulky charmed suitcase and himself in the way of hurried passerby. Where was he meant to stand if not in the road? Shouldn't the cars make way for him, or go above if there was no room between these excessively tall buildings? Draco found his wand hand itching to have at it and curse the lot of them.

"Draco!" Hermione called excitedly from the other side of the street, and he made out her waving in the distance, beside a blue one of these racing death traps, dressed as a Muggle in jeans and a pink hoodie that made her stand out against the drabness of the street. Presumably she had come by with a portkey or a Floo address they could take to make it the rest of the way. But despite him raising his hand in the air, rather politely he thought, the cars streaking past between them at such unholy paces made no sign of stopping and making a path through for him. Perhaps Muggles were yet more savage than he had ever feared, to lack such basic courtesy. "Go to the crosswalk, Draco!" she called, and after he made no sign of moving, she left the blue death trap and joined the stream of Muggles on the walkway, walking briskly to the left and away from him.

"Hermione!" Draco yelled across the road, drawing stares. "Don't leave me here!" He clutched his suitcase to him, fearful the stream of ambulatory Muggles behind him would not make a path to let him through either, even if he tried to get back to the Leaky Cauldron and flee to the Wizarding world where he belonged, only reasonably so in face of this cacophonous juggernaut.

"I'm just coming to get you!" she hollered. Improbably, all the automobiles stopped for *her*, and waited motionlessly for her to pass like some kind of despotic queen. Had the machines been able to sense he was not a Muggle? Would these Muggle machines all spurn and attack him-

"Draco, I told you to go to the crosswalk," she said nonsensically, sounding annoyed without a shred of compassion for his terror, and took him by the hand and dragged him towards the part of the street she had come from. "Come on! Mum and Dad have been waiting ages." They reached a set of lines, and she grabbed his hand when he tried to step into the road and carry his bag across.

"What?" Draco said. "You're a Muggle. Muggleborn," he corrected. "The metal machines will stop for *you.* I saw it. Come on, maybe they'll let me pass and they won't pursue me if I'm with one of their own, and I can fool them into thinking I belong."

"What?" Hermione gasped in utter disbelief, then began to laugh incredulously in what Draco thought was rather poor taste. "We have to wait until the walk light turns green. You see? Here it goes."

"Why are they allowed such enchantments on the streets? Isn't it in violation of the Statute of Secrecy?" Draco hissed in her ear as she took his bag from him, giving him a disapproving look when she felt its charmed lightness, and dragged him across the road. Draco only let out a breath once they had made it to the walkway on the other side, and looked around wide-eyed as she led him to the blue machine. "How does the green light make the machines stop? Is it enchanted to freeze them at certain intervals?"

"No, Draco, the cars are driven by humans," Hermione said, "And they see the stoplights and know when to stop and go. See these lights," she said, pointing to larger green circular lights that hung over the road, and Draco grimaced at them before approaching the machine warily.

"Gah!" went Draco, and jumped back, nearly knocking over an old lady with a shopping trolley in his eagerness to escape the jaws of the machine, which had just flashed open at his arrival.

"Here, I popped the trunk, love!" a male voice called, and then a brown-haired Muggle man with a distinct resemblance to Hermione emerged from a door in the machine. "Hello, lad, it's a pleasure to meet you. We've heard all about you, Draco. I'm Wilford Granger." The Muggle extended a hand, which Draco shook with the best appearance of calm he could muster, while the machine-beast still had its jaws ready for him. Would it remain tame in the presence of its Muggle masters? He was starting to be reminded of the Hippogriff Buckbeak in third year, if there had been hundreds of Hippogriffs about. "Nice hoodie. Let me get this for you- oh, it's so light! Haven't you packed anything?" The Muggle kept speaking to him in this inexplicably friendly tone, although they'd only just become acquainted, but Hermione nudged him, so he replied.

"It's, um..." Draco leaned in very carefully to avoid breaking the Statute of Secrecy. He was almost completely sure telling this man would not be breaking it. "Enchanted," he whispered dramatically, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

Mr. Granger put it into the jaws of the machine and with a tap to cue it to shut the jaws, they clamped shut on Draco's case. "No!" Draco whispered, and stared after it in mute horror as Hermione dragged him through the doors into the machine, where there were a sort of seats, and put a buckle on him before sliding over beside the other window. "Hermione, we aren't going to start riding about in this great beast, are we?" he whispered frantically.

"Oh, Draco, you needn't be so afraid of everything," she sighed, fondly exasperated. "Is this the boy who walked right into the Forbidden Forest without a second thought? Don't worry. I know you're not familiar with technology, but I promise I won't let you get hurt."

"First time outside the wizard world?" asked a pretty Muggle woman with auburn hair in the front seat, who looked exactly like Hermione in the eyes. The family resemblance was there, even though it was still hard not to fancy Hermione a changeling dropped incongruously in their midst.

And then the beast began to move, starting and stopping at mystifying intervals along the roadway. There were beasts around and beside it, some going in the opposite direction, some running in front of one another like it was a horserace, competing for position on the tracks between the painted lines. He had almost felt surer of his safety clinging to Potter's waist chased by Fiendfyre.

He gripped onto the door handle in abject terror, body lurching at the capricious, impossible to predict movements of this monster among monsters. Hermione was laughing at him, the evil girl, and chatting with her parents about the general Wizarding ignorance about technology, which the Muggles Studies class didn't seem to help very much. Well, in Draco's mind, such beasts as this one that had kidnapped him should not be studied but exterminated.

Finally, the beast stopped moving, after what had felt like roughly half of the years he had lost from the blue loop, and Hermione told him had been around fifteen minutes. She told him to get out, but the beast refused to let him go, until she reached over and pushed some buttons or something. "You have to unlock it, Draco," she sighed, and snorted again when the sliding belt kept him trapped against the seat. "And the seatbelt too. You have to undo it. Welcome to Hampstead." She pushed a button where the belt inserted, and it left him like it had a mind of its own.

Draco stared at it in repulsion. "Why doesn't it release by itself once it's served its purpose?"

Hermione gave him a shove out, upon which he was astonished to see Mr. Granger pulling his trunk out of the jaws of the beast, where he had thought it forever lost. "It gave my things back!" Draco called ecstatically. "Maybe it likes me!" Draco had learned in third year if nothing else to be more respectful to magical creatures. "There, there," he said, and stroked at the side of the beast. "Thank you. What a nice well-trained creature you are."

Hermione's parents were staring at him in complete mystification. Hermione looked somewhere between amused and embarrassed. "Oh, Draco, you'd think you were a time traveler."

"What?" Draco hissed, jumping away from her and the beast. His heart exploded with fear he had somehow been unmasked, and probably wouldn't even be able to explain or justify the deception. He had known how smart Hermione was, but he had never dreamed she would figure it out so easily...

"With how scared you are of technology. You're like something from a film," Hermione told him, grabbing him by the elbow and walking him into an ordinary-looking three-story house. It was nothing grand, but he had resolved to be civil and respectful throughout, however poor their Muggle abode was, and it certainly wasn't as impoverished as he imagined the Weasley home must be.

Draco got his first shock when he walked in the front hall, and his gaze landed on a cabinet piled with still images of Hermione at various ages, as well as other bushy-haired, buck-toothed folk who seemed to be her Muggle kin. "Why do you have so many paintings of Hermione? Is it because she's the only witch in the family? Did you have them commissioned to honor her?"

Mr. and Mrs. Granger seemed utterly at a loss what to make of Draco, whether he was being sarcastic, rude, confused, or simply a bit insane. "Oh, Draco," Hermione sighed for what felt like the tenth time. "These are Muggle pictures. I've told you about them, remember? They just don't move about the way Wizarding pictures do."

Draco made a face and then quickly dropped it, remembering to be polite, and put on his best smile for Hermione's parents. "They're very nice," he lied. "It's quite fitting of you to erect such a large shrine to Hermione."

Hermione put her head in her hands and started to laugh into her forearms, shoulders shaking. Draco went closer to examine the Hermione shrine, finding himself quite curious, and discovered that Hermione had looked much the same at various ages, just smaller and even

more bushy-haired. "As a visitor to this household," Draco asked politely, "Am I expected to supply an addition to the shrine?"

Hermione, who had just recovered from her laughing fit, had to bury her giggles in her arms again. Draco looked around, irritated at this insufficiently appreciative response to his sincere efforts to be civil, and decided his first priority should be securing a last meal, should he perish in this deceptively bland-looking den full of Muggle machines and daughter-worship. "Will we eat soon? I am rather hungry, Mr. and Mrs. Granger," he added winningly, and gave them his best smile.

They looked soothed for him to have finally said something remotely normal, until they heard Draco smugly tell Hermione, "I can't wait to tell Ron I won the favor of your family beast."

The Grangers served Draco a roast chicken for dinner, which was rather poor fare in truth, but he lied and praised Mrs. Granger's cooking. It had to be better than anything made by the purple-faced man, or that pinch-faced Muggle woman Draco had briefly glimpsed at King's Cross that Potter was saddled with. Draco supposed none of them were rich enough to afford servants, though he might have thought they would have machines to do this for them. But magic was, of course, vastly superior to technology, and there would be no binding house elves to a non-magical household, whatever spurious ideas he feared Hermione might someday get about that.

"So, Draco," Mr. Granger said, "It's a pity your parents were too busy to meet us outside the Leaky Cauldron. It would have been nice to meet them. Perhaps we'll run into them in August, when we do our shopping at Diagon Alley." Draco nodded with a bright false smile, trying not to imagine Father's face, should one of these Muggles come up and try to greet him in this loose, warm manner of informality they seemed to assume with even strangers. "Did you and Hermione meet there last year, or not until she made it up to that castle?"

"Not until Hogwarts, no," Draco said, politely consuming a larger share of the sweet potatoes than he could stomach. "Slytherin had Double Potions with Gryffindor." At that perfectly clear explanation, Mr. and Mrs. Granger exchanged uncomprehending looks. He still found them far preferable to Potter's Muggles.

"Oh, Mum, don't you remember, I told you all about the Hogwarts houses! Even before I went last year!" Hermione groaned, putting her spoon down with a rather rude thud. Maybe she felt like her parents were embarrassing her in front of Draco, making themselves seem more ignorant than they had to. But Draco had carried such low expectations, telling himself that it may or may not present worse living conditions than Azkaban, but he could grin and bear it, he was a Malfoy. This was heavenly in comparison to those expectations. "Remember, there's four. I'm in Gryffindor, and Draco is in Slytherin."

"Oh," Mr. Granger said after a moment. "Yes, of course I remember, sweetheart, but wasn't Slytherin the-" Another furious glare from Hermione stopped him finishing, but Draco understood his meaning quite well.

"The evil house?" Draco drawled. "Ah, so Hermione *has* educated you then."

Hermione seemed to hear a note that boded ill coming to Draco's voice. "Mum, Dad, might we please be excused?" she asked, but Draco had no intention of moving.

"What did Hermione tell you," Draco asked, deliberately casual, "About Slytherin?"

Mr. and Mrs. Granger weren't falling for it. They led him up a short set of stairs, and to a guest room that was again paradisiacal in comparison to Azkaban, his chosen frame of reference. No, the painting of a sailboat on the wall didn't move, and there seemed to be some demon living in the walls called electricity that periodically lit and darkened the space upon the commands of the house's masters, but Draco had his wand at the ready. *Better than Dementors*, Draco could safely conclude, and settled on the guest bed with satisfaction.

"I'm sorry about my parents," Hermione said, lingering in the doorway repentantly. "They know all Slytherins aren't evil. I've told them all about you."

Something in her weary, burdened manner made Draco defensive. "What? I know I was unprepared to deal with all of these machines, but I've made it to your home without breaking the Statute of Secrecy. Nor have I infuriated your parents or disturbed your shrine. I even wore this bizarre thing," he said, tugging at the chest of the sweatshirt, whose striped red-and-white arms were matched there with a strange family crest of arms across the navy blue front, above an incantation of *Adidas.* "Although I don't know at all what these symbols are meant to indicate."

"My father helped pick it out. He's a fan of Arsenal," she explained. "That's a football club. See? It says Arsenal Football Club on your back. I thought you'd like it, since you like Quidditch."

"Very nice," Draco said politely, failing to hide he had no idea what he was talking about. Mr. Granger would explain later, upon tentative request, that football was a Muggle game that seemed to imitate Quidditch in a simpler inferior form, with one goal instead of three hoops and only one ball, which mainly stayed on the ground and didn't even move by itself.

The following morning, Mr. Granger was seated in the living room, for what he called 'the early kick-off', and Draco took a seat curiously. This Muggle sport did indeed seem to involve a great deal of kicking. He was interested as well by the portal device Mr. Granger was watching it on, which he explained was this fabled telly-vision he had heard Dean Thomas speak of. Apparently, the image on the box before them was like a Wizard picture, a moving picture but a long one, and which could show something happening somewhere else at the same time.

Hermione came down for breakfast later, and laughed aloud in surprised pleasure to see Draco sat on the sofa, listening to Mr. Granger fail to explain something called 'the offside rule'. "Look at you two," she said fondly. "He's always been at Mum and I to watch the footy with him, or kick around a ball with him in the garden, but he can't get either of us interested. Always says he wishes he had a son for that."

Draco frowned at Mr. Granger, confused. "Can females not perform this sport?" He could not see why it would be any less suited to both than Quidditch, and had been confused by Mr. Granger's explanation of why there were only males on the two teams on the pitch.

"Of course they can!" Hermione said hotly. "They just play it separately. No, it's just because I wasn't ever interested, so I wouldn't watch with him."

Draco was no less confused. "Why did you not mandate her to consume this sporting event with you?" he asked Mr. Granger, who looked not to understand the question. "How severely did you punish her for her refusal to obey your orders?"

Mr. Granger looked amused before he realized Draco was being serious, and then pitying in a way that made Draco's skin crawl. "Draco, it's up to Hermione to like what she likes. Whatever she wants to pursue in life, we'll support her a hundred percent."

"Breakfast is served!" Mrs. Granger called, but allowed Draco and Mr. Granger to bring their plates back to the sofa to finish watching. Although it was hard to follow, Mr. Granger seemed to be supporting the red team called Arsenal, though Draco was assured they were not indeed allowed to play assisted by the wielding of Muggle firearms, which was just confusing. He did understand when the ball was kicked into the large net, which seemed to make both the gun Muggles and thousands of red-wearing Muggles in the stands go as wild as if someone had caught the Snitch.

He must have reacted disrespectfully to Mr. Granger's ritual celebration of this, though, because Mr. Granger pulled up Draco's hand in the air then and slapped it without provocation. Draco tried to put extra charm into his congratulations at the end of the match, in which Arsenal had beat something called a Manchester United. The conclusion had been caused by no event save the expiring of a time duration. "Felicitations, Mr. Granger," Draco intoned. "Your team were indeed superior at the kicking."

Mr. Granger laughed at that, as did Mrs. Granger and Hermione, who were seated on the other side of the living room playing a card game. It was strange to see the family remain together after a meal, rather than removing to their own rooms after, but perhaps they were dawdling in fear the intrusive and untrustworthy wizard might abscond with some of the furnishings. "May I ask you, Mr. Granger," Draco asked as politely as he could, "What I did to displease you?"

Mr. Granger looked mystified once again. "I'm not angry, Draco. That was fun, wasn't it?"

"I had believed so," Draco said with a sniff, "But then you slapped at my hand without warning. Is it importunate to inquire as to the behavior that provoked this censure, that I may attempt to avoid it in the future?" He wondered if it stemmed back to when he had disrespected the Hermione shrine. He'd had no idea she was such an important personage amongst her Muggles.

All three stared at him blankly for a while, until Mr. Granger started to laugh. "Oh, you mean when I gave you a high-five?" Draco squinted at him doubtfully, and Mr. Granger raised his hand. "Sweetheart, give me a high-five," he said, and to Draco's appalled shock, Hermione went over and slapped at his palm, the way Mr. Granger had at Draco's. "See, people do it all the time. It's a way to congratulate someone or show you're on the same team."

Draco tried to hide his horror. "My. How quaint," he said with a queasy smile.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Come on, Frankenstein, it's not gonna kill you," she said, and held up her hand in the air until he reluctantly slapped it, trying not to hit too hard. "A little harder." This time, Draco heard a slap in the air, which was a bit satisfying in truth, and Hermione seemed satisfied. "That's it, Draco. Don't worry, I won't expect you to perform one in public."

"Did you call him Frankenstein?" Mr. Granger asked with a smile. "That's one of your mum's favorite movies, 'Mione."

And so it was that on Draco's second evening in the wilds of savage Hampstead, he ended up seated before the Muggle box again, this time with all three Grangers, watching the extended moving photograph of the story of *Frankenstein.* Draco was proud to already know that was the name of the doctor and not the monster, though most Muggles apparently didn't. It was bizarrely engrossing, though Draco got himself into trouble by the end. "How did you get the nickname Frankenstein, Draco?" Mrs. Granger asked. "You're such a nice-looking, polite young man. Is it ironic?"

Draco and Hermione exchanged panicked glances. Clearly, when Hermione had said she'd told them *everything,* she hadn't meant it. "Oh, there was this funny rumor, about experiments Draco was conducting, that sounded like Frankenstein," Hermione said briskly. "But of course Draco was doing nothing of the sort, and they wouldn't be magically possible anyway-"

"I have done something a bit similar," Draco told her, academic interest taking priority over prudence. "I can conjure and animate practice dummies to practice curses on. Even the Langlock curse, that was hard to control. And I can't see why something like the film wouldn't be perfectly viable- plenty of Golems have been created, it would be the incorporation of human flesh that would prove the difficult point. But if hardening potions were used to alter the flesh into a stonier texture, there's no saying a Golem couldn't be formed from bodies- ow!"

Hermione had kicked him in the shin, as hard as any of Mr. Granger's professional ball-kickers. "What Draco is trying to say is that it's nothing to do with *him.*"

Unexpectedly, Mr. and Mrs. Granger relaxed. "Oh, that's good, sweetheart," Mrs. Granger said. "I'm just glad it wasn't a mean sort of nickname as a monster, because he's different. You know, because he's gay."

"Hermione!" Draco hissed, mortified. "You told them?"

Hermione looked guiltless. "Well, I had to," she said in a practical tone, "They might not have let me go over and stay at the Manor unsupervised if I hadn't, we are both twelve now, and you are a boy. And they wouldn't have wanted us alone in my room here. They're quite protective, you know. But I told them you only like boys, and they're fine with that, Draco."

The fabled Uncle Gary was indeed present in several still pictures with Hermione, along with another obviously homosexual man and an adopted son, all prominently displayed components of the Hermione shrine. It matched what Hermione had first told him about her family being tolerant, but still, he squirmed in his seat. He had been unmasked to every

student at Hogwarts, and probably any professor who cared enough about student gossip to listen, but not many people dared talk about it openly around him. "Of course, Draco," Mrs. Granger said warmly. "We don't hold with any kind of prejudice in this house. But I know there are a lot of ignorant, hateful people out there, and I'd hate to think of such a sweet young man suffering from discrimination."

"It's brave of you to come out at such a young age," Mr. Granger asked seriously, seeming genuinely concerned for his welfare. "It has to have been difficult. Have you had issues with other students bullying you?"

Draco snorted before Hermione shot him a sharp glance. Draco had been the one bullying other students in the blue line, and even if he hadn't been a Malfoy, the thought of other students trying to bully him? It was pretty hilarious, when the people around him had grown increasingly reluctant to talk about him for fear of their tongues being mutilated. "Uh, no."

Hermione seemed to search for a construction to put upon this that wasn't *Draco knows dark magic and no one wants him to curse them.* "Draco, is, ah, pretty tough," she said faintly. "No one would ever dare give him a hard time."

"That's good," Mr. Granger said, and thumped Draco on the back, but in a rather friendly manner. "Good on you, lad. Don't let them give you any guff. You be who you are. And we're glad Hermione has a friend as brave as you."

Given that Draco had been forcibly outed by Hermione's housemates and then cursed one of them for it, that was a charitable interpretation. But Draco wasn't about to be the one to disabuse him. "Thank you, sir," he said earnestly, and earned them a round of hot chocolate with extra marshmallows before being sent to bed.

The Vanishing Cabinet

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Hermione hugged him goodbye so fiercely at the door to the Leaky Cauldron, Draco was squirming to get away by the time she was through. "I'm going to be so bored now that you're gone," she sighed before letting him go. Draco scoffed at her, though he feared the same.

"Next time you come, Draco, we'll watch some more of the footy, yeah?" Mr. Granger asked. Draco was going to rip his Arsenal hoodie off the moment he stepped out of their sight, but that didn't mean the thought of watching more ground-level Quidditch wasn't interesting.

"Would it be possible to accompany you to a game at the Highbury place sometime, perhaps?" Draco asked, feeling oddly bashful. "There would be a great number of people about, and I am aware it may prove an inconvenience, but I would be pleased to finance the tickets for anyone attending as well as myself, as well as provide recompense for any working time lost..."

Mr. Granger hugged Draco by way of an answer, before calling out they should discuss it at Diagon Alley, because the season would start in August. Mrs. Granger hugged him then too. Draco didn't even try to pull his wand on them to punish them for putting their filthy Muggle hands on him. Nor did he consider it past the initial moment of shock, though he would assuredly put a stop to it the next time he saw it coming, and did not lean at all into that maternal warmth.

So it was that in the past several years, he had now been hugged more by Hermione Granger's Muggle parents than his own.

Returning to his own parents proved as boring as well as stifling as he had expected. Seeing Malfoy Manor through Hermione's eyes had shown its splendors anew, but his old eyes were back in place again. That did leave them free to read Severus's books of dubious legality, without much to distract. He had set himself a number of projects for the summer, in a reserved section at the back of the first and then second notebooks: *1. Plan passive approach to second year (Chamber of Secrets opens)- review all occurrences meticulously.* (Successful.)

Draco found himself staring at this first item, which had seemed so logical when he wrote it- after all, his one active attempt to push along the future had ended in him nearly getting Weasley and then himself killed for it. But after returning from Hampstead, things had felt less clear. Somehow, he doubted that the Grangers would have been so free with that hugging, had they known he was planning to allow their daughter to face a Basilisk.

The other items were simpler. *2. Prepare to make Quidditch team.* (Successful?)

Such was necessary to keep up this fragile new peace with Father, who Draco doubted would believe any failure unintentional on Draco's part. So to keep up his end of the deal, he could simply practice as much as he wanted. It wasn't like he didn't have more than enough free time, over the long aimless days alone. This time, he'd have to trust in his own talent- well, that and his Nimbus 2001- to get himself into the position to have Potter wipe the floor with him.

3. *Research Salazar Slytherin, the Chamber of Secrets, Basilisks.* (Successful.)
4. *Practice Occlumency.* (Successful.)
5. *Find Dobby.* (Unsuccessful.)
6. *Mend fences with Father and Mother.* (Successful?)
7. *Maintain correspondence with Hermione and Severus.* (Successful.)

He had done well at that, sending her regular letters, in comparison to a single return letter to Ron's birthday letter, thanking him but warning him that any more letters from him would get Draco in awful trouble. No more had come. He hadn't answered any of the letters from Potter at all.

8. *Get over obsession with Potter.* (Unsuccessful.)

The final items he had added to this list were strategic notes for the year to come:

1. *Unveil Potter as Parselmouth in duel.* That was perhaps his most important action, to keep the passive approach unfurling smoothly.
2. *Maintain judicious emotional distance with Ron and Potter.* He had underlined Potter twice.
3. *Keep to yourself, keep your head down, keep quiet.*
4. *Improve relations with fellow Slytherins to cordial and respectful but distant.*
5. *Make no more jokes about troll. No one else thinks they're funny.*
6. *Curse no one else.* Draco had written that first, reconsidered, and crossed it to write, *Curse only as many people as necessary.*
7. *FIND DOBBY.*
8. *Get over obsession with Potter, for Salazar's sake.*

The first test of that resolution, whose inclusion on the second list attested to its failure on the first, came on August 19, the prearranged date set with Hermione for their trip to Diagon Alley. Her owl told him the date still worked, and that Potter was spending the end of his summer break at the Weasleys', who'd agreed to meet them. Though Draco told himself he had no one to impress there, he spent entirely too long dressing himself, for someone whose mirror still showed him as an undergrown albino runt. At least he had more sense this time around than to affect the awful slicked-back style he'd thought made him look so stylish, and had just made him look more like his father. Instead, he just pushed it behind his ears where it was getting long, and resolved to cut it at his chin once it grew that long.

Draco's excitement for the trip only lasted until he and his father made it to Knockturn Alley. The dark, narrow street conjured up images of Death Eaters filing inside Borgin & Burkes, to

step through the vanishing cabinet into Hogwarts- not that he'd been there to see it, but the picture hit him with all the force of a memory, once Father insisted Draco go inside with him.

Draco hadn't had a respiratory fit in months, but the first breath of that uniquely decaying smell sent terror through his blood, worse than any metal Muggle beast. Nowhere felt safe to rest his eyes upon, whether the Hand of Glory in its glass case or the bones, chains, and all such basic trappings, to fit out the aspiring dark wizard for any and all ambience needs.

When the bell clanged, Father told him, "Touch *nothing*. We both know of your penchant for laying your hands on ancient things you *shouldn't*." Draco was happy to oblige, staring down at his hands only to watch them tremble. And then he saw the cabinet.

He stopped breathing, but he couldn't look away. Death itself had appeared silently at midday, if death wore the face of your greatest shame in the contours of unexceptional carpentry. *Dumbledore- Severus-*

The cabinet looked almost like a varnished black walnut, just like his wand, though there was less brown in it and more dark gray.

Father cast one irritated look back, before seeing his son not doing anything immediately disastrous and looking away again. Which may have been a mistake, since Draco was frozen between the impulses to try to buy the cabinet, set it on fire, or do what he had vowed for this year: nothing.

He was so laughably weak. He had thought his resolve unshakeable, and yet all it took was having to *look* at this thing and he was ready to throw all his plans away, and start wildly casting every spell he knew, like at the Mirror of Erised. Much as with that, he hardly expected much to happen if he did, other than laying waste to the room and furniture around, while leaving the target untouched.

Father had said not to touch anything, but there was no danger in touching this. He'd learned the feel of its twin by heart over sixth year. It greeted him with the same lacquered smoothness. And if he'd been gratified to see Vince back after the Fiendfyre that had consumed him in the Room of Requirement, he had to tolerate the survival of this denizen of it - not that this was the one in Hogwarts, just its twin. His mind was getting scattered.

What would be the point of destroying this if he didn't even understand the connection between them? Could the connection be forged to some other cabinet instead, if there were others? His hand slid, with the feeling going out of the fingers and turning into prickling, a second away from vanishing in front of the cabinet instead of inside- vanishing into the choices he could never take back, no matter how much the world rearranged itself to make it seem he could. He would always remember. His choices would always be living in his head, waiting for the punishment he deserved to fall upon him...

"Draco?" hissed the voice that judgment wore in his imagination, colored in Avada Kedavra green. When he pulled the cabinet open, Potter's green eyes were glowing out from the shadows like a little cat. Though not as little as Draco remembered from the start of summer.

"Draco, what are you doing here?" Potter hissed, as if Draco and not Potter was the one hiding in what would one day be literally the door to hell.

"*Potter*," Draco breathed, paralyzed by the thought that Potter instead of him was the one about to disappear...

Father had seemed occupied at the counter with Mr. Borgin, but when he called Draco's name and looked back, Potter panicked. "Close the door!" he hissed. When Draco just stared, he grabbed Draco by the Slytherin crest on his chest and hauled him into the cabinet with him.

Draco's body brushed Potter's, side to side and knee to knee, inevitable in a space this unsuited for two growing twelve-year-olds. He felt his own breath on Potter's neck, as he squirmed to try and fit, and found them face to face. He had thought he would be taller than Potter after the summer, but their growth spurts had hit them about the same. Their faces were too perfectly matched for Draco not to have to turn his face aside, noses brushing as he twisted his head away.

He was now inside the vanishing cabinet with Potter, perhaps the two things he feared the most in the world that were not currently at Azkaban. He wanted to shove Potter away and fling himself out, making a scene if need be. But that would alert Father to Potter's presence in perhaps the last place that Draco would have ever expected him, except in some creative composite nightmare. Not to even speak of the fact the cabinet itself was in Borgin & Burkes. "Draco," Potter said breathlessly, hands going up to steady Draco, and ending up linked around his neck for lack of room, while Draco's hands fell to brace on the wood of the cabinet beside Potter's head. "Draco, where are we?"

Draco wished he had the space to look Potter in the face, because the level of derision he wanted to inflict upon the Boy Who Lived could not be conveyed merely in words. "In a cabinet, Potter, where you dragged me. Has your short-term memory-"

Potter cut off Draco's uninspired attempt at a jibe to explain. "I don't know where I am, we were taking this powder thing through a fireplace-" Sweet Merlin. Already a second-year, and the savior of the wizarding world was still calling Floo powder *this powder thing*. "And we were supposed to say Diagon Alley, but I think I pronounced it wrong-"

"And so you ended up here," Draco sighed, "A small distance away from your destination. This is a shop in Knockturn Alley. The last place you want to be seen if you're Harry Potter."

"Is this a dark magic shop?" Potter whispered. "Because I saw creepy things, and then I heard people coming into the shop, so I hid. That man with long blond hair is your father, isn't he? What are you doing here?"

"My father is a dark wizard," Draco whispered crossly. "This is, as you said, a *dark magic shop*. It's not exactly NEWT-level Arithmancy, *Potter*." He tried to unobtrusively shift his weight backwards, but that threatened to send him falling over if he wanted to stay inside. He just ended up clinging to Potter more tightly in the cramped dark, with one of Potter's hands right against the side of his neck. "I suppose you've forced me in here not just to grope me, but because you expect me to save your chosen arse? I hoped to avoid being dragged into any more of your Gryffindor follies, but the year hasn't even started, and already-"

One of Potter's hands covered Draco's mouth. "How are we going to get out of here?"

Draco squirmed his lips free of Potter's fingers. "And your inability to pronounce, somehow," Draco made sure to stress every syllable to fully articulate the ridiculousness, "*Diagon Alley*, is my problem why exactly?"

"If you leave me in a place like this," Potter whispered, "Hermione won't speak to you for *months*!" He was right, but he ruined it by ignoring his own call for urgency and whispering, "Draco, why didn't you write back to me all summer?"

"Draco?" Father's voice sounded from what sounded disconcertingly close.

"Listen, Potter, he's not going to leave without me, so if we have to be found by him, I suggest it not be quite so *intimately*. I've managed to convince my father the rumors Finnigan spread about me were lies, but you wouldn't want to give anyone the wrong *idea*, would you?"

Potter let out a small growl of irritation and shoved at Draco's chest. Draco had already started to brace himself against the door, though, and Potter's strength sent him flying out with a crash. Potter scrambled out too in a clamor, falling over his hands in a simultaneous effort to pick up his glasses, help Draco up, and shove the cabinet shut. With his Seeker's reflexes, he'd somehow more or less managed to by the time Father came stalking up to investigate the disturbance.

"Wow," Potter whispered in Draco's ear, "He really looks like you. And Hermione met him over break, he can't be that bad, right?"

Draco could have told Potter that he had already laid eyes on Father for a longer period than Hermione had been granted. But best not deflate that Gryffindor courage more than necessary.

"Play it cool," Draco whispered back. "Act like you're supposed to be here, follow my lead, we'll be fine." Draco forced a smile and stepped between Potter and Father. "Ah, Father, I forgot to tell you one of Hermione's acquaintances was coming to meet us here at Borgin's. Let me introduce-"

"I'm Harry Potter," Potter said, as if his scar hadn't been showing from his bedraggled, soot-covered state. Somehow Draco had failed to realize all the soot Potter had gotten on himself from the Floo, taking it all for shadows. Hiding in the cabinet with Potter had gotten the black dust all over Draco too, in the most falsely incriminating fashion imaginable. He tried to brush it off his robes, but that just smeared it more over his hands. Rubbing at his face and hair worsened it. But an equally filthy Potter lifted his head like he was in the finest dress robes money could buy, straightening a pair of glasses that Draco could now see were broken on his running nose. He wiped his nose sootier with the back of his sleeve, before brushing past Draco to offer Father an unflinching handshake. "Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Malfoy."

Under other circumstances, Draco would have had to laugh seeing Father so flabbergasted. That was a face like one of their house elves had just stolen his wand and started breezily attempting the Cruciatus curse against him.

"Potter," Draco said, stepping between them again. "Tergeo," he said, several times for himself and then Potter, until they were relatively dust-free. Then he used some cleaning charms to get them fully back to presentable. "Look at me, Potter," Draco ordered. Potter obediently faced him, and closed his eyes when Draco reached for his glasses. Draco pulled them off and cast Reparo. Potter didn't open his eyes again until Draco put them back on. "There, come on," Draco said, forcibly straightening Potter's Gryffindor robes, which by occluding the red and gold crest, the soot had rather improved. "Here we go. Now you can shake his hand."

Draco turned to Father, expecting to see him at least somewhat mollified, by a relatively pristine Potter offering a hand. But Father was staring at Draco instead, with a look that was generally unreadable, but tended to portend some form of ill for his son. Belatedly, it occurred to Draco that Father might not have relished the sight of Draco cleaning up Potter. Not only because it was servant's work, but because it made Draco and Potter seem closer than they actually were.

Father did shake Potter's clean hand eventually, though, with a grimace on his face like he had just stuck his foot in manure. At least Borgin hadn't followed Father all the way over from the counter. Draco hardly thought a man like that would relish the sight of Voldemort's famed vanquisher, besmirching his pristine floorboards with Weasley soot.

"You arranged to meet here, you said," Father said finally. That relatively mild, if disturbed look he had for Potter turned to murderous on Draco. That made Draco keep his wand in his hand, though lowered to his side.

"Last-minute change of plans," Draco said innocently. "An owl from Hermione. It's these horrid Muggles he has raising him, you'd never believe what *savages* they are. I don't even think they can tell *time* correctly, they've messed everything up." Draco piled on detail to distract from the question of how any of this would add up to Potter having to meet him *here*. "I met them at King's Cross, you know. Quite unpleasant-looking folk, and I suspect they may have even owned a large metallic beast that expels smoke from its entrails and consumes luggage in its caboose. Potter here is naturally most relieved to be out of such despicable company and in the presence of proper wizards, are you not, Potter?"

Potter had the grace to nod.

Father had perhaps never looked at Draco with such disgruntlement. As the summer months had stretched on, though, Draco had not just found his early contempt towards his father loosening its biting grip on him. He had also found the degree to which he could make himself care for his father's moods lessening as well.

"And where might you be heading, Mr. Potter?" Father asked with that infinite disdain of his, which was objectively inferior in both depth and inventiveness to Severus's. No wonder Potter seemed to be facing up to it already with such coolness. He had never seemed that scared of Father in the blue loop either. At the time, Draco had regarded that as yet another proof of poor discernment, but really, years of a sneering Severus must make Father seem a pitiful adversary in comparison. "Gringotts?" Father echoed, and Potter nodded firmly.

"Gringotts," he said in a bright Gryffindor tone, as if a world did not exist where Lucius Abraxas Malfoy would not happily chaperone the Boy Who Lived wherever he liked.

It almost hurt Draco's face to hold back his smile.

Incredibly, with a tight nod, Father led them out with a sharp hiss of *Gringotts*, a tap of his walking stick on the door, and a slap of it to slam it shut with a ring of the bell behind them. And then any and all unsavory characters wandering Knockturn Alley were graced by the sight of Harry Potter, escorted through by an honor guard of two Malfoys.

It was only after they were halfway out of Knockturn Alley that Draco put away his wand. Because Potter noticed and gestured for him to.

It made Draco wonder, egotistical as it seemed, how much of Father's tight-lipped acquiescence had been motivated by the presence of Draco's wand.

Running into Hagrid before they made it all the way out was fortuitous, to the extent it allowed them to shove Potter off on him, and avoid immediately having to meet the Weasleys. It was calamitous, though, for how it betrayed the good terms Draco had found himself on with the Hogwarts gamekeeper. "Hullo there, Draco," Hagrid said, bending to beam down at him beneficently. "Good t' see yeh, there, little dragon!"

He winked as he said dragon. Presumably in reference to Draco's role with the tragically-named Norbert, as if Father wasn't right there watching. Or maybe that was Hagrid's idea of subtlety, and if Father hadn't been around, Hagrid would have shouted, *Greetings, Malfoy boy who helped me illegally smuggle a dragon out of Hogwarts, and worse, consented to me naming it Norbert!*

"Greetings, Hagrid," Draco said with a perfunctory bow, and ignored Potter's little wave goodbye. He would see Potter again at Flourish and Blotts. He had it down in his notebook. The annoyance he had felt watching the newspaper photographers fawn over Potter there lived long in his memory. But if Draco wasn't there, it wouldn't be any great loss for the timeline. They didn't need any special unpleasantness between Father and the Weasleys for them to all hate each other heartily regardless.

It might be interesting to have a minute to speak to Ron, though. Just to hear what those half-wild mutant twin brothers of his had been up to. Not that he wanted to see Ron *himself*, mind. He told himself he had no sentiments of friendship towards that orange simpleton.

After they left Potter to the half-giant, Father was quietly fuming for much of their shopping. But he didn't seem willing to express his darker thoughts towards Draco in public anymore. Maybe it was that unlike before, he feared his doubts in Draco could be genuinely injurious to the Malfoy name. Or maybe he just knew there was the talon wand in the pocket of the boy he'd be insulting. Either way, the air was taut as a string between them. It only worsened when faced with the plebeian hysteria surrounding Lockhart's book signing. *Magical Me,* the placard read. Draco watched the man and remembered him as he always had most fondly: disarmed and thoroughly unmanned in front of the entire school by Severus, who he had been so foolish as to refer to as his *assistant*.

From reports of his real loyalties, Severus hadn't even really been the *Dark Lord's* assistant.

Merlin, Draco was looking forward to seeing Severus every day. A part of him took fortification from that unflappable self-possession of Severus's, as if it could rub off on him. At least it was a model to emulate, to pretend he didn't care what anyone thought of him- pretend he was half as poised and clever and invulnerable.

He climbed up to the second floor to look down upon the chaos like last time. His gaze was attracted by a knot of red hair, which proclaimed the Weasleys again present in line below. That meant Potter and Hermione in tow. Lockhart was not far behind Draco in noticing them. "It can't be Harry Potter?" he shouted. Draco had to hold back the volume of his laugh then, not having to see Potter's face to imagine his comic horror.

As begrudgingly as Draco admitted it, increased proximity to Potter had proved that he did not, perhaps, enjoy fame and adulation as much Draco had used to think, the way Draco would have in his position. That whole world-saving bit had likewise come to seem less attention-seeking, and more like genuine attempts at heroism, of which publicity was a *negative* side effect rather than the raison d'être. He could see how red Potter was in the face, as his photo was taken shaking Lockhart's hand, or rather of having it shaken by force. The shyness Draco had thought a poor affectation was now something he knew to be real. He could have almost pitied him, to be so transparently used by a man that the blue loop had proved to be a calculating, grasping fraud.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Lockhart called out dramatically, "What an extraordinary moment this is! The perfect moment for me to make a little announcement I've been sitting on for some time! When young Harry here stepped into Flourish and Blotts today..."

Watching Potter's face rather than the hapless uncritical crowd was a study in anomalies. The attention that it seemed only natural for a person to enjoy just seemed to make Potter shrink further into his shell. Draco couldn't wrap his mind around that reticence of Potter's. His Muggles, for one, didn't treat him with any reverence whatsoever, and were unlikely to have the kind of shrine to him apparently customary in these households. You would think Potter would be desperate for any affirmation he could get.

"I will be taking up the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!" Lockhart finished, to great applause. Draco had to hold back another laugh as Potter looked all the queasier at the news.

As well he should. Another year without a competent Defense professor. Maybe with one, Potter could have defeated the Dark Lord all the sooner, or at least without so many dead Gryffindors to spoil the party. Really, you would think Dumbledore had been trying to make it as difficult for Potter as possible.

And that was Draco's cue, though he didn't remember the exact taunts he had given the Weasleys. And it would be hard to deliver them with plausibility now. The sight of Potter dumping his free books immediately into the Weasley girl's cauldron, while she gaped at him as worshipfully as anyone in the crowd... it turned Draco's stomach as he approached. Potter must have changed a great deal in the years to come, to so abhor adulation for being the Chosen One, and yet choose a girl who embodied the worst of it.

"Quite a show up there, Potter," Draco drawled. He felt like he had to let Potter know he had understood his role in it. "You looked more comfortable in a vanishing cabinet."

"Draco!" Potter gasped, turning redder than Girl Weasley's hair. "Oh no, please don't tell me *you* saw all that... wait, what do you mean, a *vanishing* cabinet?"

"He didn't want any of that," Girl Weasley said defensively, as if Potter needed her championing. Of course this little ginger child had missed Draco's point. The sight of her bristling like he'd insulted her boyfriend put a rush of spite in him. He wanted to make some crack at her expense, but this girl would come to have great influence with Potter in the years to come. He had to think carefully about the first impression he wanted to make on her. He didn't know why he'd neglected her as a variable in his planning for this year, save for a supplemental note to *Allow Girl Weasley to be trapped in the Chamber and saved by Potter again, mustn't ruin their love story.*

"I know," was all Draco said instead, voice coming out small and weak. The foreknowledge of everything she would be to Potter went through him and left him pathetically bleak.

"Draco!" Ron exclaimed, slinging an arm around his shoulder. "Good to see you, mate. Cor, Harry, did Draco see that whole show up there with Lockhart? No wonder you're so red." He dropped his books into Girl Weasley's cauldron, which seemed to have become a Weasley repository. "Sorry if the letter got you in trouble with your father. I didn't write any more after you wrote me back, right? And Hermione said she told you everything we were up to, same as she did with us. Have you really got all-white peacocks that eat *snakes*-"

"Wait," Potter interrupted, looking somehow even more irritated than before, when dragged up unwillingly before the crowd. "You wrote to Ron over the summer and not me?"

Hermione made a face like she knew trouble was coming, but Ron answered obliviously. "Oh, just once. His father forbade it after."

"Did he forbid you writing to *me*?" Potter asked through gritted teeth. "He didn't, did he? Draco, why didn't you-"

Potter's voice had risen enough to draw the attention of Arthur Weasley, who looked disconcertingly tall and ancient above their child's frames. "Ron, what are you doing? It's mad in here, let's go outside-"

"Well, well, well- Arthur Weasley." Father's hand fell on Draco's shoulder. Draco was filled with the cold memory of how much more readily Father had consented to Draco writing to *that Mudblood girl,* than to any Weasley. This was a conflict that needed no prompting to ignite.

"Lucius," Mr. Weasley said, with admirable restraint.

"Busy time at the Ministry, I hear," said Father. "All those raids... I hope they're paying you overtime?" He reached into Ginny's cauldron, amidst the glossy Lockhart books, and extracted a very old, very battered copy of *A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration*.

"Obviously not. Dear me, what's the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don't even pay you well for it?"

Draco would have made a show of standing up to Father. Or at least, he told himself he would have. But a red-faced Mr. Weasley did so before he could. "We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard, Malfoy."

"Clearly," Father said, looking over at Mr. and Mrs. Granger. He seemed primed to insult them, before remembering he had let his own son spend a week visiting them. Draco just prayed the Grangers had more sense than to greet Draco here.

Father turned his cold eyes to Girl Weasley instead. Draco wished he had the courage to shake Father's hand off his own shoulder. "Perhaps your daughter would prefer a more *dignified* father, to one who fails to provide the bare necessities for her education. Although by the look of this runt, any attempts at civilizing her would be a waste anyway-"

Draco was hit by Girl Weasley's cauldron as Mr. Weasley launched himself at Father, shoving him into a bookshelf. Draco picked up the cauldron and held it over his head to protect him from the books that were falling. Soon, his gaze was attracted by the Weasley twins, who from the look and sound of them had experienced a good summer indeed. Their calls of "Get him, Dad," and "Show that evil prick!" were ones that had outraged Draco the first time around. He found himself admiring them now, almost jealous of their ability to say them. Mrs. Weasley was trying to save her husband from his own folly, while Ron pulled Hermione to safety from the avalanche of books- as if that wasn't exactly what she would see in the Mirror of Erised- and Potter grabbed Draco by the wrist as well.

At first, Draco thought Potter was trying to pull him out of harm's way too, which was kind if unnecessary. Then Potter's whisper made him realize Potter overestimated him enough to think he might intervene. "Draco, your father and Ron's are fighting!"

"What am *I* supposed to do?" Draco hissed back. He was soon the one trying to pull Potter back, with Potter trying to move them closer to the fight instead. Draco had saved Potter from Borgin & Burkes. Wasn't that enough for him? Potter didn't know Hagrid would be there to break it up any second, but still-

"Did you hear what your father said?" Potter whispered. "Don't you always say, 'No one speaks ill of Draco Malfoy or his friends and keeps a working tongue'?" Draco could point out that he didn't consider Potter and Ron his *friends*, let alone Ron's shabby father or that slow-witted little girl. Somehow, he doubted Potter would enjoy that logic.

"Break it up, there, gents, break it up!" Hagrid hauled Father and Mr. Weasley apart from each other with impressive ease. Draco had to wince at the sight of a rapidly forming black eye on Father. That could be healed quickly, but Father would be apoplectic at the thought of being seen in such disarray for even seconds. Not even to speak of the indignity of having his person marred by a filthy blood traitor.

And Father still had the old transfiguration book. With knowledge of Girl Weasley's fate this year, Draco's eyes were prompted to look closer. He saw that Father had slipped another book into the cauldron pressed behind it.

"Here, girl- take your book- it's the best your father can give you-" Father wrenched his arm away from Hagrid, brushing at himself like the half-giant's touch had sullied him more than Draco had been by Potter's soot. "Draco!" he barked, beckoning with an eye towards the door.

Draco's eyes wouldn't leave the cauldron.

"Draco," Hermione said, touching his arm, and he didn't know what she wanted.

He could knock the cauldron away from Girl Weasley. Or he could say something like *Father, you've put back one of our books with hers by mistake*, and take it, and whatever Father said or did after not let it out of his hand- except he'd planned to follow the blue loop- but Hermione's hand touching his arm would be stiff and petrified in only a fluke escape from death before the school year was out if he didn't *take the book*-

"Draco!" Father barked.

Not daring to look any of the Gryffindors in the eye, Draco pulled away from Hermione and raced after his father.

That obedience did not save him Father's wrath after, but yelling was better than the stinging hexes that would have been provoked by such behavior at Borgin & Burkes last time. Still, Father's spleen vented at him in insult after insult, everything he had said in that Howler and more, grated more than he wanted it to. He had stood there and let Father handle the Weasleys as he liked. His friends would all be disenchanted with him, in even a best case scenario. But Father was taking out his fury at Mr. Weasley on Draco still. He had made no one happy. Not even Mother, who Draco stormed to after Father had finished yelling, and confronted with a bluntness that made her look pinched and distant. "Is Father up to something, Mother?"

Draco couldn't tell if she was lying. "What are you talking about, Draco?"

Did she know about the diary and Father's plans? Conjectures regarding his father's role in the Chamber of Secrets, which had only come to him half-formed near the end of second year, were coming together with clarity now. "Do you think Father is planning anything for this year?"

Mother looked mystified. "What do you mean, Draco? Like more charity events before the summer is over?"

So either she was so ignorant she would be of no use, or she was just playing dumb, lying to his face and insulting his intelligence. Either way, he found himself just about as angry at her as anyone else in the world. If she knew Father was planning something at Hogwarts, that meant putting her own son theoretically at risk, pureblood or not. This was the woman who had once lied to the Dark Lord about Potter being dead. Where was that woman now?

Are you afraid of him? Why are you like this? he screamed at her inwardly. *Why don't you care? Why do you just let him do as he likes? Why did you always just* let *him until it was too late?*

Mother was staring at him, watching him stand there silently shaking. At least he hadn't drawn his wand. "Never mind," Draco said, and walked out of her dressing room in such a fury, he almost *wished* there were prisoners in the cellar for him to vent it on.

He didn't know if he regretted letting Girl Weasley take the diary. He would hold to the blue loop- except knowing and doing nothing, that did *worse* than make him feel impotent. It made him feel like a traitor, the same way he had used to in sixth year when he doubted his assignment, a traitor to think of disobeying Voldemort and imperiling his parents...

It would be so much easier if Draco had no ties like Severus. If he could choose how to fight without anyone he needed to protect, a life in the dark, without family or love to weaken him. Maybe that was the secret to Severus's inventiveness, his clarity, his self-sufficiency.

He went up to his room and drafted owls to Hermione, Ron, and Potter. They were little better than hasty apologies for not intervening, peppered with weak self-justifications, and assurances he did not personally feel the same about the Weasleys. He spent longer drafting a letter to Severus, underlining everything he safely could about his suspicions. He laid out Father's actions at Burgin & Burkes and the bookshop, the transfer of dark objects from old places, the Ministry raids, Father's hostility towards Arthur Weasley heightening- lies about eavesdropping or seeing papers in Father's office about the Chamber of Secrets-

Draco sent his letter to Hermione, but burned all the rest.

T.M. Riddle

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco didn't know what to expect of the trip on the Hogwarts Express, but he knew that any invitation from the Grangers to go watch Arsenal play the kicking game had not been forthcoming. He told himself over and over that he was not upset at the thought of Mr. and Mrs. Granger having watched his father and judged him by it. It wasn't like he could blame them. He had frozen up without doing a thing to show any opposition, allowing the Malfoys to put up a united front. He didn't have the nerve to mention the Arsenal in his two remaining letters to Hermione before September, and she didn't mention it either.

He was pathetically relieved, then, to run into her on the train, and have her enfold him in a hug and go, "Hello, Frankenstein." She was the one to pull away first for once, though. They turned to see Ron and Potter seated in her compartment, Ron's tattered old rat perched on his shoulder looking none too happy to see Draco either.

"Ron, Harry, say hello."

"Yeah, hello," Ron said weakly, and Potter grunted.

"I'm sorry," Draco said, and closed the door behind them, feeling only slightly less anxious than last year, when he had hallucinated being chased down the corridor of the train by Fiendfyre. "I'm sorry, okay? My father was out of line, I know that. I'm sorry I didn't step in." He looked at Potter as he said that, since Potter had seemed the one to most expect Gryffindor heroics out of him. Potter had been staying at the Burrow this last stretch of summer, and him and Ron would have had ample time to work themselves up into a lather about Draco if they wanted.

For once, Draco might have preferred pity to the dislike in Potter's eyes facing him now. Children took everything so seriously. Draco himself had used to cry and cry over losing to Potter at Quidditch, and even over arguments with Potter he hadn't felt he won. Small things felt bigger, when the choices you made didn't end in life and death or torture and freedom.

"What *was* your father doing in Knockturn Alley?" Potter finally asked. Draco looked to Hermione, but she was just sitting down and staring out the window with a discontented sigh.

Draco didn't strictly know, per se, uncertain whether it might have involved Father's plans for the Chamber of Secrets, but even the official reason from Father was one he couldn't just spit out. "Ron... *your* father... you know I can't tell you all, because your father is..."

"What?" Potter protested. "Mr. Weasley might succeed in one of his raids on your manor? You told us your father *was* a Death Eater! If all the Death Eaters get caught, then maybe the Dark Lord won't ever be able to come back- Draco, what side are you on-"

Draco had thought he had answered that definitively, going down through the trapdoor with Potter, let alone with how he had taken Weasley's place as the black knight. To have to answer it again so unceremoniously before he even made it back to Hogwarts was stinging. "He's my father, Potter. What do you expect me to do? Trust Ron won't tell his father anything? Or what, start passing Ron information for his father to ruin my family?" It was counterproductive letting himself get angry at them, though, when he knew it would only cement their sense of wounded outrage against him. "I'm sorry, really. But you're asking too much of me-"

"Draco," Ron said, slowly and softly, "Do you think it might be better for *you* if your father did go down?"

"Hermione already told us," Potter went on, "That you wrote to say you're sorry. But you're asking too much of *us*, to just accept your father followed the man who killed my parents, and you'll still protect him. My *parents*, Draco- please, if you know something, I think you have to-"

"I don't have to do anything you tell me, Potter," Draco spat out tightly, and went right back out of the compartment. He walked slowly, thinking it was because he was so angry he had to recover his composure. But at his disappointment at no bushy brown hair appearing behind, he realized he had been lingering in the hopes that Hermione would run after him and join him, or at least call out something. He took the rest of the corridor to the back of the train in half-self-righteous, half-self-castigating silence, because of course he *was* holding onto a secret likely tied to his father that would endanger not just Girl Weasley but Hermione, but *they* didn't know that-

And so it was he ended up in the last compartment once again, despite all the things he had thought had changed in the intervening twelve months here in the red line. He wished he had his trunk, because he wanted to get out the notebooks, scrutinize the second one cover to cover again. As if that would show him something different on the umpteenth attempt, show him some incredible insight he'd never realized about the blue loop. But he practically knew it by heart anyway. There was no answer other than the Chamber of Secrets opening and closing again-

"Hello," a light airy voice said from behind him, and Draco whirled only to find the compartment not unoccupied this time around.

"Lovegood?" Draco gasped before he could help it, grabbing onto the side of the train cabin to steady himself, as a very miniature version of the token Ravenclaw in Dumbledore's Army swam into view before him. The girl he had seen almost every day for weeks on end, when she had been locked in the manor he had only just left, the girl who had smiled at him every time he visited even when he missed a day or had no news to give her from the outside world- even when she had seen or knew he'd had to use the Cruciatus curse on someone else in their dungeons. He didn't remember her as a child at all. He'd never noticed a Ravenclaw a year under him until fifth year, when he'd seen her start hanging around Potter. She was

instantly recognizable, though, not just by the white-blonde color of her wispy hair, as rare and pale as his, but by that patient smile.

"Yes," she said with a smile, "I'm Luna Lovegood, it's a pleasure to meet you." She didn't ask how he'd known her name, which made him fear she knew something, until he remembered she had been called Looney Lovegood for a reason, absolutely batty by all accounts. Even if over that year there at Malfoy Manor, she'd seemed calmer and saner than anyone else under that roof.

"I- I- I have to- you- Lovegood, you- I have to *go*," Draco stammered, and fled from the compartment before his breathing hitched and slowed and eventually began to falter. He couldn't find any empty compartment, so eventually he pushed his way into one with Slytherin second-years, Vince and Greg along with Blaise, who was watching them consume their customary mountain of sweets from the trolley with absent indulgence, sitting exactly where Draco had once sat. They looked up alarmed at the sound of his hitching breath and the slamming door, only to look scared when they saw who had so unceremoniously intruded on them.

"Draco, I swear, whatever Theo told you, I haven't been talking anything bad about you this summer," Blaise began, as if Draco's heavy breathing was nothing but a sign of incredible anger primed to explode upon him.

Draco managed to fasten a baleful glare on him. "I know what you did, Blaise. Get out of my sight while you still can."

The three of them fled without even remembering their candy. He was more surprised when neither Vince nor Greg tried to sneak back for any of it.

He looked over at Luna Lovegood as they approached the flying carriages to Hogwarts, knowing her to be one of the few others who might see the Thestrals. Sure enough, the rumors of her looniness, certainly not unfounded but ridiculously overblown, might be starting now, as a knot of other girls who looked Ravenclaw-bound looked appalled at what to them was Lovegood cooing and petting at the air. He took a long, deep breath of night air, breathing in the pure magic that seemed to radiate from anywhere near Hogwarts, and finished what remained of his breakdown to breathe normally again, while mentally mocking the ignorant girls watching Lovegood.

Though in fairness to them, even if they could have seen the Thestrals like Draco could, it still made a very strange sight.

He slipped into a carriage with the Slytherin second-year boys, and only when the carriage had lifted off did he realize the air of petrification that had taken over the carriage upon his arrival. Theo in particular looked queasy, while Blaise had the same wariness as when he'd fled the compartment. Vince and Greg looked scared, in their less expressive way, of being tainted with guilt by association. Draco was filled with exasperation at himself, for finding no better way to clear himself a carriage than going right back to menacing his housemates. That item of *Improve relations with fellow Slytherins* was off to a rousing start.

Draco was content to let the silence reign, mentally trying to calculate how long Potter and Ron if not also Hermione might stay mad at him, and if it would be enough for them to stop sitting at their study table. But his was reverie broken by Theo blurting, "Draco, I didn't mean it!"

Draco let out an aggravated sigh. Was he about to be obligated to curse a fellow Slytherin on his very first night back, just to keep up the protection his reputation gave him? "Didn't mean what, Theo? You'll have to be *far* more specific."

Whatever was in Draco's tone seemed to convince them he knew everything. Typical Slytherins, not trusting the others not to blab- rightfully so, given Blaise had attempted to sell out Theo on the train to save himself. They all started talking at once, so Draco silenced them instantly by taking his unmistakable bent wand out of his pocket. "One person at a time, gentlemen. Since you bring it up, I would be disappointed not to have you satisfy my curiosity." Blaise coming forward first gave him the right to squeal first. "What was said about me, Blaise?"

"Nothing bad, really," Blaise said quickly, glancing around rapidly. "Just that- that it's true that you are queer, whatever your father tells ours, because you fancy Theo!"

Draco couldn't help smiling in relief, when the word to come out after *fancy* was not *Potter.*

"Oh, and did you concur in this assessment, Theo? Did you find yourself at pains last year to resist my unwelcome advances?" Theo withered at his sarcasm. "Vince and Greg, did you have any part in these discussions?" They had never shaken their heads so quickly.

"They did!" Theo protested. "Blaise started it."

Great. If he cursed one, he would have to curse them all. "What have I told you all about when people run their tongues, telling lies about me or my associates? I was fully prepared to come in this year and be civil and respectful to all of you, despite how laughably far you are behind my magical level and power. But you see fit to amuse yourself gossiping about me anyway like besotted schoolgirls? I'm disappointed to call you Slytherins. If you're going to risk your tongues running your mouths about me, at least risk it for something *interesting.*"

"They'll know it was you," Blaise blurted, only to raise his hands immediately in apology when it drew Draco's gaze to him.

"Relax, Blaise," Draco drawled, "We're not at school yet, so I think I can be merciful for once- *only* once." They seemed scared enough already to suffice. "If you repeat such behavior, however, the consequences... will be more... severe." He enjoyed using Severus's emphasis and intonation and watching its effect on them. "But this once, a warning should suffice, since after all, what you were saying is true."

Draco only realized they had misunderstood when he got off their carriage first and offered Theo a reflexive hand off, only for Theo to recoil from it like Draco had been wearing his snake watch and it had sprang at him. With the Chamber of Secrets reopening and snakes a live issue, Draco had thought it politic to hide away that enchanted snake watch, given its

tendency to uncoil and even hiss at times. But even without it, Theo jumped back like a venomous viper had started upon him.

"Oh, come on, Theo, relax, I didn't mean the *first* part was true," Draco groaned. "I don't fancy *you.* I fancy someone else already, as a matter of fact, and find none of you remotely worthy of my attentions, so there need be no fear for your precious pureblood *virtue*. I meant the second part is true, that I'm gay." Once they all climbed off, he leveled them with a paralyzing stare that kept them lined up beside the carriage. "I'm telling you all now openly. Reconfirming it directly. And if word spreads to my father, it will be through one of you and your parents, and I'll know. But I won't know *which*, and I won't care enough to try to figure out, so I suggest you begin exhibiting more of a Slytherin circumspection."

He was the subject of more curious than fearful or even judgmental stares after that, though, particularly from Blaise, for whom all sorts of recent peril never seemed to dent his natural self-possessed smugness. "Who *do* you fancy, Draco?"

It was like they had never stopped being friends, for Blaise to feel he had the right to ask. Draco remained annoyed in silence through their arrival in the Great Hall and the Sorting, which was less stressful but also less fun than last year, as he could only predict for sure from memory with the Slytherins- except for Lovegood to Ravenclaw, whom the sight of sent chills through him once again, her bright hair rendering her a beacon of uneasiness even once she sat.

When he looked up from picking at his food to hear Blaise pestering him again about who he fancied, he regretted volunteering that information. But there was no help for it. If he didn't provide an alternative, Blaise was smart enough to suspect it was Harry Potter. "You really want to know? Knowledge is a burden, if sharing it holds consequences not worth the risk of knowing."

Pansy and Millie seemed to have been briefed as well, so Draco delivered them all his trademark tongue-to-roof-of-mouth hand gesture and watched them quiver. "Tell us which boy you fancy," Pansy demanded anyway, her pug nose scrunched up with indescribable unhappiness.

Draco gave it a thought, looking behind him. He seized on a figure he may have been seen staring at by his housemates before, albeit for worse reasons than they could ever suspect. "Cedric Diggory," he said nonchalantly.

"A *Hufflepuff*?" Theo practically yelled, before putting a hand over his mouth.

Draco snorted. "Only children put such undue value on arbitrary groupings like the houses," he said loftily. Theo muttered under his breath to Vince something like, *He wouldn't be saying that if his Sorting hadn't taken half an hour.* "He's a brilliant Seeker, you know, and fit as hell. That's the kind of man I would fancy, not a runt like Theo."

"So you like Seekers, do you?" Blaise said, with a knowing look Draco wanted to curse off his face, only to go suddenly silent then, his face contorting with distaste.

"Draco," Hermione said, who had somehow been brave enough to march right up to Slytherin with an unworried face. "Draco, I'm sorry about on the train. There was this book I wanted to show you, could you come?"

There would never have been a world in the blue loop where this behavior by a Muggleborn would have passed with so little amazement, let alone censure by the Slytherins, who were turning to witness this incredible incursion at their table. But the threat Draco carried from last year seemed to keep them almost fully silent. "Come on, then, Hermione, let's go," he said loudly, taking her arm as he got up, to show them all that he could do as he liked, because none of them were powerful enough to make him care about their opinions.

It was déjà vu up to a certain point, having been coaxed here by Hermione once before, to show them all her book which told about Nicholas Flamel. And he had to wait in the Gryffindor common room, despite his attempts to follow her past it, because as she crossly told him, just because everyone in school knew he was gay, still didn't mean a boy should be in the girls' dormitory.

He sat himself in one of the furthest armchairs from the fireplace, drawing up his legs in hopes of avoiding attention completely before she returned. He hadn't been imagining the greater share of stares and dirty looks they'd gotten for a Slytherin in Gryffindor Tower than last year, though Hermione had just told him to ignore it and no one really cared anyway. Last time, though, he had been a first-year, inherently more unthreatening than any year above, and in the presence of their token Gryffindor Saint Potter, whom they all so rarely dared question.

"What are they so terrified of?" Draco complained to Hermione before she left him. "They saw Dumbledore give me all those points for helping you."

"And win Slytherin the House Cup," Hermione said reasonably. "You think that endeared you to them *more*? Everyone just thought you did something sneaky and underhanded to cheat your way into those points."

So Draco stayed absolutely silent, waiting for Hermione as unnoticed as he could make himself, before his scanning for potential threats made him notice someone else in turn: Girl Weasley seated also alone, also in a chair she seemed to have chosen to remain unnoticed in, possibly avoiding her brothers there by the fireplace. She looked overwhelmed by her first day, and her very young face was tired and unsuspecting as she pulled the diary from her bag and opened it.

In that moment, Draco stopped living in his body. Everything went into the air and down into that diary, magnetic and ruinous, because he knew that plain leather book. He'd seen it before- seen it in Potter's hands this year, jealously guarded by him, with Girl Weasley nearby involved somehow. But that was indistinct compared to the memory that made him sure-

It had sat in the corner of the case in the Manor where he had found his wand. A place no one but the elves, even Draco, was allowed into, with those gems and a katana and a wand suffused in evil, and whatever was in the journal that made it worth keeping, worth storing in a place like that- worth taking the trouble to surreptitiously slip to a Weasley on her way to Hogwarts-

Draco knew what it would do if not how, but that should have meant nothing. He looked around in an absent stupor until his eyes fastened on Hermione, coming down the stairs in an excited rush, her arms weighed down by a book far too heavy for her. From a distance, he couldn't read its full title, but there was something at the end of it about house elves.

"Here, Draco," Hermione called, "I've got it," and at the same time, Draco got to his feet, stepped over the Weasley girl, and ripped the diary from her hands.

"Hey!" Girl Weasley protested, drawing the attention of her brothers nearby, and Potter too, Draco realized with a stab of fear. He hadn't seen Potter sitting with them. "What are you doing?"

"This diary," Draco told her, "Is evil. I'm taking it away from you so you can be safe."

Draco headed for the common room door, and made it out past the Fat Lady without being touched. He thought somehow against expectation that the Gryffindors would have listened and left it at that, but he had been dreaming. Not that this was the way he would have chosen to do this, if he'd planned it at all.

"Draco!" Hermione's voice was the first to call as he hurried down the stairs he knew went the quickest to the dungeons, but Potter's touch was the first to impact. Draco couldn't stop him from pushing him against the stone wall on the landing, but he did keep the old leather clenched firmly in his hand. "Draco, what are you *doing*?"

"Let me pass," Draco hissed, and drew his wand before Potter could prevent it.

Potter stepped off, raising his hands and backing away, but not very far, and followed right at Draco's side as Draco started down the next flight of stairs.

"Think you can just steal our sister's stuff, Malfoy?" one of the twins' angry voices called from disconcertingly close.

Draco snarled, "I'm trying to keep her safe, you idiots, I'm trying to protect her from this," and waved the diary in the air.

"Ginny said you said it was evil," Hermione said fearfully, coming up breathless at the rear. "What do you mean, Draco, where are you taking it?"

Draco was too panicked to keep up his usual guard. "I'm taking it to Severus! He'll know what to do with it!"

"To who?" went Hermione, and then frowned. "Do you mean Professor Snape?"

"Severus will take care of it, just leave me alone, I'll handle it," Draco spat at them, and when Ron put up a hand to the twins, Draco hoped they had seen reason, but no, Ron was just sending them off.

"Hey, will you guys make sure Ginny is okay? We can take it from here. We know Draco," Ron said, and the twins went, worry for their sister seeming to outweigh the desire to pummel

Draco. So much concern, as if Draco had done anything more than snatch a dark object away from her at risk to his own person.

"Whatever that is, Draco," Potter said, getting in front of him at the bottom of the stairs, "We're not taking it to Professor Snape. If you really think there's something wrong with it, then you can take it to be looked at, but we're going to Professor Dumbledore."

Draco would have preferred Severus, for the greater honesty and trust he could have exercised. Not to speak of his own personal history with Dumbledore in the blue loop, and the man's overall notorious favoritism towards Gryffindors. But Dumbledore had been bizarrely kind when he found Draco cursing the Mirror of Erised, and awarded Draco all those points for selfless courage, so maybe Draco could trust him to hear him out. And Potter wasn't budging.

Thankfully, Dumbledore was there in his office when the four of them arrived, but unfortunately, McGonagall proved to be there as well, startled from the timetables they had seemed to be looking over on Dumbledore's desk by Potter's banging. Dumbledore opened the door to four panting, angry second-years, two of whom were still brandishing their wands. At the sight of the professors, though, Draco hastily put away his wand, and Potter followed. "Headmaster," Draco said, with a year of practice of speaking calmly even without much breath, "We apologize for disturbing you so late at night, and if we have to be out past curfew. Would it be possible to send for Professor Snape to join us?"

"What on Earth could be the matter?" McGonagall sniffed, before looking mollified by the presence of three of her Gryffindors. "Mr. Potter, what is the meaning of this?"

"I have to show you something, Headmaster Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, please look," Draco said, "Only we need Professor Snape, please," and against Ron's protests Dumbledore nodded slowly, face turning grave, and walked backward in his office. He touched a great red bird Draco had not seen perched up there before, Gryffindor-colored with its crimson broken up by golden feathers on its beak and undersides- the famous phoenix of Dumbledore's, whose name Draco could not have recalled at this moment if Voldemort was there asking with a wand to his forehead. After a whisper from his master, the phoenix flew away, presumably to summon Severus, and McGonagall was beckoning all of them to stand in front of Dumbledore's desk.

"Now, then, Draco," Dumbledore said, resuming his seat behind his desk. "What is it that is so urgent for us to see?"

Draco dropped the notebook down in front of him, though it felt dangerous to take his hands off it for a second, knowing the potential all wrapped up in it, and Merlin, he wished he hadn't done this on a whim and had a plan for this. "A diary," Dumbledore said with a frown, before staring with more interest at the cover and the year on it. "Empty, except..." He flipped through the pages, peering down through his spectacles, and stopped at the very first page. He didn't read it aloud, but something in the very air of the office changed at once. When he turned to show it to McGonagall, Draco managed to read upside down the name T.M. Riddle. It seemed to mean something to McGonagall too, as her face went from irked but curious to solemn as the grave.

"Draco," Dumbledore said, closing the diary, "Where did you find this?"

"Ginny," Draco said, "Ginny Weasley, she had it, I saw."

"Don't put this on my sister, she hasn't done anything bad," Ron complained, before Dumbledore raised a hand to forestall him. Draco pulled every Occlumency shield into place he had, envisioning his mind as an impenetrable dagger like Aunt Bella had taught him. *Your mind is a blade. Not a thing that gets cut.*

"This is the young Miss *Weasley's* diary?" Dumbledore asked. He had looked less shaken that night on the Astronomy Tower. But Draco couldn't afford to think of that.

"Is there really something wrong with it, Headmaster?" Hermione asked earnestly, though anyone with an ounce of observational skill could have already told from Dumbledore and McGonagall's reactions. But she took a step back, face falling as she crossed her arms in front of herself protectively. Draco stole a glance at her but dared not try to catch her eye.

"It is too soon to tell," Dumbledore intoned, clearly lying, and then turned his spectacled gaze on Draco with that frightening cleverness, bright blue eyes gone from sparkling to bearing a warning in them. "Draco, why did you think this diary might be- what did you call it? Evil?"

"Is Severus coming?" Draco asked nervously, looking around, and McGonagall frowned.

"Why would you refer to your Head of House in such fashion-" she began, but again, Dumbledore held up a hand with those eyes that said he already knew everything, past and future.

"Severus is Draco's godfather," Dumbledore said calmly, and Draco's attempts to think of a good lie fell away. He turned to Potter's trio, hoping somehow Hermione had already guessed and wouldn't care, or that none of them would find this important information.

"Snape's your godfather?" Ron echoed in disbelief. "*Snape*? Is that why he favors you so much in class?"

"Draco, why didn't you tell us-" Hermione sounded so dismayed, Draco felt a wave of guilt.

"So that's why you were so sure he wasn't after the Stone last year," Potter said in disbelief. "But you didn't say anything. Even when we thought he was trying to get the stone for Voldemort-"

Draco fought off the urge to berate him for saying the name. "You would have just thought he was more guilty!" he yelled, knowing confrontational was the worst approach he could take, but unable to hide his sense of unfairness. "Because he's tied to my family! You would never have-"

"How many things have you not told us-"

"Gentlemen," Dumbledore cut in, with a voice that seemed to make both his and Potter's die instantly in their throats. "We should attend to the matter at hand. Draco, what alerted you to the possibility of dark magic in an object so benign as a first-year's diary?"

He could have said he saw it in Malfoy Manor, or saw his father putting it in the Weasley girl's cauldron. But that never felt like an option.

"My wand," Draco blurted, for the lack of anything else in the world to say. "My wand started, I don't know, reacting to it. I got a feeling from it there was something awful nearby. Something worse than any magical object I've encountered. My wand seemed to know it."

"Your wand," Dumbledore echoed. "May I see your wand, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco handed over his wand with a slowly fading sense of hope, telling himself there was no way Dumbledore could prove Draco personally had not *felt* any sensation earlier, even if there were no physical signs now. "A fascinating wand," Dumbledore said, and hope became more difficult. "Did you get this at Ollivander's, Mr. Malfoy?"

When would Severus be here? He wouldn't have let this go so far. He knew, he would keep Draco from having to say in front of the Gryffindors...

"Mr. Malfoy?"

"It was from Ollivander's," Draco said tightly. He could feel the trio watching him intently along with the professors, as if something dark was about to come careening uncontrollably out of him.

"Was this always your wand, Mr. Malfoy, or did it ever have another owner?"

"No. I mean, yes. No to the first, yes to the second, uh- Ollivander didn't *sell* it to me-"

"Who did he sell it to, Mr. Malfoy?" Dumbledore asked, voice gone solid and pressing.

Draco stared down at his hands, feeling a buzzing at his fingers. "Aunt Bella," Draco said very softly, hoping only Dumbledore would hear, and the others wouldn't understand if they did.

"Pardon?" McGonagall asked, leaning forward, and there was no help for it.

"My aunt," Draco said, lifting his chin and facing them defiantly because he was a Malfoy and he would not cringe and scrape before Gryffindors, even Dumbledore. "Bellatrix Lestrange."

Draco turned to see the trio's reactions before the professors', and was gratified to see Potter and Hermione look blank. But Ron's face was a mask of horror. "Draco," he stammered. "Did you- did you say Bellatrix Lestrange? *The* Bellatrix Lestrange?"

"You can wield the wand of Bellatrix Lestrange," McGonagall said in a choked sort of voice, watching him like a hawk. She might have taught Aunt Bella at school. Maybe she was looking for similarities in them. "It responds to you as its owner?" Draco nodded.

By all appearances, McGonagall hadn't known, nor had Dumbledore. The one teacher who had arrived just too late. He let himself into the office with a grave face, only for it to curdle in disgust at the sight of Potter. "To what do I owe these summons, Headmaster?"

Severus's face changed only when he saw the wand in Dumbledore's hands. It was a shock to think Severus might have kept the fact from Dumbledore. But then, Draco hadn't thought it important, and Severus might not have either. Except Draco, with this amateurish lie, had just made it very important.

"Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said, "Has brought us this diary, originally belonging to one Ginevra Weasley. He insisted we send for you as well. Severus, do you know anything about this?" He passed the diary to Severus, who got a more guarded look once he read the first page. And then he turned back to stare down at Draco as he handed it to Dumbledore, looking so disappointed in him that Draco cursed the Gryffindors for stopping him from bringing it to Severus first, and avoiding all this mess.

"He claims his wand has sensed the dark magic in it," McGonagall told Severus. "His wand was originally owned by Bellatrix Lestrange. A family heirloom, we take it." Draco didn't argue.

And Severus didn't bother to pretend to be surprised, though that lack of reaction drew an outraged noise from Potter behind them. "That is quite impossible," Severus said. "Did you perform any detection spells? Any magic on this book at all?" Draco shook his head weakly. "Simply having been owned and used by a witch or wizard in the past, however dark or powerful, has never been known to grant any special sense of dark magic without spells or incantations." Draco eyed him with betrayal, though he should have known Severus when put on the spot would never back up Draco's feeble lie.

"Boy," Severus said flatly, "How did you know about this?"

Draco stared up pleadingly, but no help was forthcoming. Then Potter stepped forward. "It could have something to do with his father. When I went to get my school supplies, sir, the Floo powder sent me to the wrong place at Diagon Alley, and I ended up in a shop called Borgin & Burkes." *And I got you out of there, you ungrateful worm.* "Draco was there with his father. He said his father was a dark wizard, so he was at a dark magic shop. And we ran into them again at Flourish & Blotts. There was a fight between Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Weasley. Mr. Malfoy was touching Ginny's books. Headmaster, I think Mr. Malfoy must have bought this diary at Borgin & Burkes and slipped it to Ginny out of revenge. Because he hates Mr. Weasley."

So close and yet so far, Potter. Though close enough to damn me.

"How like you, Mr. Potter," Severus said warningly, "To strike up tales out of nothing, and make scurrilous accusations without any evidence." But Potter had turned to Draco, his Avada Kedavra-eyes unshakeable, like that liquid green had Veritaserum in its mix.

"Did you know what he was going to do?" Potter asked Draco, eyes pleading with him to say no. "Did you only realize this now, or have you just changed your mind because you don't want to see Ginny dead?"

It won't kill her, you vapid Scarhead, unless you fail to save her. "I'm not lying, Potter. My wand is what sensed it. I've never seen that diary before."

"Draco," Ron said, grabbing his arm. "You expect us to believe that, when you were just telling us on the train that you wouldn't turn on your family for us? I get why you're protecting him, Draco, but he's *evil*- he doesn't even care about you, he's terrible to you anyway-"

Draco wrenched his arm out of Ron's grasp, even though it was true.

Maybe he had actually started to hope that Father was softening, that he had chosen to take a more constructive collaborative approach to his newly-matured son, with his willingness to accept Hermione as proof. That maybe, time with Hermione might even somehow soften Father a bit when it came to Voldemort's ideology, as knowing her had done for Draco.

But Father hadn't so much as seen Hermione anyway, until Flourish & Blotts. Potter was almost certainly right about what Father had done there. Draco had seen Father putting two books back into Ginny Weasley's cauldron. Potter had it almost all right, except for that the Malfoys had already had the diary. Draco was doubly glad he hadn't told the trio his father was at Borgin's selling rather than buying, in case one of them might guess this diary was the one artifact Father had brought that he hadn't chosen to sell.

And Draco found himself still thinking like this, organizing the world around lies to protect Father's secrets. Ron's words had stung, but they were true if Father had still done this. He'd sent a monster after the Muggleborns at Hogwarts, when he knew what Hermione meant to Draco. Maybe this time, he'd even done so partially to target her...

Ron was telling the three professors about the raids his father had been conducting on Malfoy Manor. Not that Draco had almost ever noticed, up in his room reading with all kinds of silencing charms. He just stared off into space and tried to calculate how badly he'd just fucked up.

Implicating his wand had fooled no one. It was just one more proof, to anyone who somehow hadn't gotten the message yet, that Draco was a dark wizard from a dark family. But it did give a lie to stick to. That had a virtue of its own, even if everyone knew it a lie. The disbelieved lie formed the most perfect kind of wall, stubborn and pointless but impassible in front of the truth.

"Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said, "Are you sure there was nothing else about the diary that alerted you to its true nature? I know this may be hard for you, but we must know everything possible in order to properly handle something as dangerous as I fear this diary may be."

"Had you seen it or anything like it before?" McGonagall asked bluntly. Severus looked mutinous, but Draco caught Severus's eye, pleading wordlessly for him to be silent. He knew Severus was about to snap something about not forcing Draco to incriminate himself, which would just make him look irrevocably guilty.

"No," Draco said, though he felt his acting skills almost dried up. He didn't have it in him to give the wide-eyed innocent act anymore, to give anything but this dull glumness, resigned to playing the villain. It shouldn't matter. And it didn't in the grand scheme of things, if it kept the Chamber from ever opening. Maybe the passive approach was better on paper, but practically, the chances that everything would unfurl exactly as before were too narrow.

There was his friendship with Hermione altering her routine, her motions, her moods... any slight change in anything, that could be that razor-edge difference between the Basilisk just petrifying or killing.

And maybe that was the realization that had sent him snatching the diary, seeing her with her book smiling at him. He was too weak to let himself take that risk with the only friend in the world he had.

Had only in past tense perhaps.

"Thank you, Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said finally after waiting for Draco to change his answer, long enough that no one in the room could have missed that Dumbledore didn't believe him. "We will keep this book and investigate it thoroughly. Inform Miss Weasley that she must regrettably find herself another diary."

"I could buy her one," Draco said weakly, "A better one," and Ron sighed.

"You think that's what she'll want after this?" he asked wearily. "More presents from your family?"

Ron had come around to believing Potter's version of events, it seemed. It wouldn't be hard, with how ostentatiously Father had looked at Girl Weasley's books, taking and putting them back. Even starting a fight, with what had to be the intention of making it possible in the chaos. Draco wouldn't doubt it in Ron's shoes. Sometimes Father had the subtlety of a Hippogriff in mating season.

"Ron," Hermione said warningly. No one spoke for a long moment, while Draco tried to think of a way to offer them money for it that wouldn't make Ron just think worse of him.

"Well," Dumbledore concluded, "I think this has been more than enough excitement for one night. Draco, thank you for bringing this to our attention. With your cleverness, you may just have saved a young girl's life." *Hermione's, not Girl Weasley's. I'd sooner not save Girl Weasley's if I had a choice.* "Ron, you may explain it to your sister tonight, but I think it's past time all of you get to bed in your respective houses. Minerva, Severus, if you wouldn't mind escorting your students back to where they belong."

"Wait," Draco said, and didn't take his wand back right away when Dumbledore held it out. It didn't seem he'd even have the chance to speak to the trio before they parted ways, let alone without professors listening. "Please don't tell anyone about my wand."

"Right. You only wanted your *godfather* to know," Potter said bitterly.

"Please," Draco said again, mortified by the begging note in his voice, and knowing himself helpless to stop them saying anything regardless. Any sense of power to control what people said of him, like he'd felt on the carriage with the other Slytherins, couldn't have gone up more in smoke.

"Who *is* this- this person your wand was from-" In the heat of the moment, it seemed Hermione had failed to pick up the name.

"You haven't read about her, Hermione?" Ron marveled, before his gaze turned to Draco. "She's his aunt. Bellatrix Lestrange. On his mother's side. She was one of Voldemort's most powerful followers. Mum- Mum told us about her brothers, my uncles, they both died in the war," he confessed, voice cracking painfully. "About Uncle Gideon and Uncle Fabian. They fought against the Dark Lord. She said it took five Death Eaters to take them down. But the only names she ever mentioned were Dolohov and Lestrange..."

Draco would never forget, until the day he died, the way Potter looked at him then.

"Come, Draco," said Severus, dragging him away.

His arm remained draped over Draco's shoulders on the way down towards the dungeons, although less in an affectionate manner and more like he thought Draco might bolt. "Boy," he said, stopping at the entrance to the Slytherin dungeons and taking him by the shoulders with a serious look. "How did you know about the diary?"

"Will you tell anyone?" Draco asked. "Will you tell Dumbledore?"

"No," Severus said. Draco should have had better self-protective instincts. He shouldn't have taken the risk of believing in anyone this much, even Severus. But after tonight, Severus felt like the only person who would believe a thing he said anyway. And Draco did have part of the truth that would prove explanation enough, without things that locked his tongue to his mouth. "It may assist me in dealing with the object," Severus added, and Draco took a deep breath.

"I saw Father put it in the Weasley girl's cauldron at the bookstore," Draco said all in a rush, "Behind her Transfiguration book. Like Potter said. But he didn't buy it at Borgin's, he was selling off artifacts because of Ministry raids, but I guess he didn't sell the diary with the others. I saw it last year too, in the same case in the Manor where I found Aunt Bella's wand."

Severus's hands dropped from Draco's shoulders. "And so," he sighed, "From what I gather, you addressed this situation not by correcting it before it could do damage... not by surreptitiously slipping it out of the girl's things, which your friendship with Gryffindors could have granted you access to, without even the need for magic. And then you could have brought it to me in secret. But you unceremoniously seized the offending object from the hands of the girl, inside *Gryffindor Tower*, in full view of her brothers, and stampeded to Dumbledore's office to regale him and McGonagall with lies so obvious, they did not even fool the Lilliputian intellect of one Mr. Potter?"

Draco just looked up at him helplessly, and Severus gave a long sigh. "But what can I expect? I forget sometimes. You *are* only twelve years old."

The Slytherin Seeker

Chapter Notes

Playlist

It was as Draco hovered on his broom at Quidditch tryouts, watching the motion of much older, larger players in green above him, that he reckoned he might as well have just let Father buy him a place on the team after all.

It wasn't like any of the Gryffindors had thanked him. As with so many of his token attempts at their kind of nobility, it had netted him no reward. So what was the point of it? It was childish to think like that, though, and he had to look longterm. But in the wake of sitting at a study table with only Hermione all week? He hardly could understand in retrospect why he'd put upon himself the additional stress of tryouts.

It didn't help that it was several senior members of the Quidditch team he'd first heard mocking the rumor about his sexuality, joking about him fancying Potter of all things. Such talk had died out after he used the Langlock curse on Seamus, but that had come with its own set of problems. Most all of Slytherin up to even Flint had given him a wide berth in the aftermath. They would all be more comfortable with last year's Seeker around, even though he had lost to Potter in their game.

Handsome Terence Higgs, in the same year as Flint, hung out with him and all his cronies. He had never been rumored to have kind of proclivities Draco had, proclivities which might make them think twice about sharing their dressing room with him. Higgs cut an eye-catching enough figure in his emerald-green robes that Draco had to dub that a pity. Perhaps, as Blaise had annoyingly noted, Draco did tend to like Seekers.

For the first time, Draco wondered why no girls ever tried out for the Slytherin team. It seemed just to be the understood thing, or maybe it was just a byproduct of the size-over-skill mentality that seemed to have taken over the team in his time. But the selfish part of him was glad for the lack of any girls to provide slight, swift competition.

He remembered the line-up that would otherwise be the same as the blue loop, with Marcus Flint, Adrian Pucey, and Graham Montague at Chaser, while Lucian Bole and Peregrine Derrick were to be chosen as Beaters, and Miles Bletchley still at the hoops as Keeper. Higgs would fit in better with them in every way, but Draco had his Nimbus 2001, he had practiced all summer, and besides, just because he wasn't better than Potter didn't mean he still wasn't better than these narrow-minded imbeciles.

Draco wondered if it would have been counterproductive in the long run, to corner Flint right before tryouts and threaten to curse him if he didn't put him on the team. Or just cursed

Higgs, that might have also done nicely.

But he was on his own, truly, for the first time in Quidditch. Here he was, all set to be judged on his own merits, with his reputation at school working against rather than for him this time. Flint called them down from their individual warm-ups. Draco's body instinctively remembered the way to line up like soldiers with their broomsticks raised. Flint gave them a singularly ineloquent speech about the need to beat Gryffindor this time around, as if that was the true goal of the season and not the Quidditch Cup or even House Cup. Then dark-haired, dreamy Pucey gave a slightly more coherent speech about what lay ahead for them in today's tryouts, while Draco's mind divided itself between ogling him and abject terror.

They were soon in the air flying drills, which somehow Draco's mind that had traveled with him still knew by heart, the patterns flying themselves after years on the team none of these boys could know about, years of secret experience that would make Draco appear more talented than he actually was. Higgs didn't have the advantage that he would think in that experience category, as Draco carried more real game experience in his mind than youngest-Seeker-in-a-century Potter.

It was an act that was surprisingly soothing, the rhythmic repetitions, if not quite as freeing as last year's night expeditions, when he had flown freely alone. Perhaps some of his nerves were calmed by noticing how much smoother his broom flew than any of the others'. They might want to recruit Draco almost just for his Nimbus 2001. And Draco's age was less of an impediment if their true focus really was on beating Gryffindor with Potter as their seeker.

I won't beat Potter anyway, but I'd be happy to let you think it so I can get Father off my back.

Draco's twelve-year-old throwing arm could use some work. Drills tossing Quaffles back and forth left him with sore biceps, and a sore ego at how much shorter he could throw than anyone else. Being twelve had its advantages, though, when it came to the Beater portion of the tryouts, when he and Higgs along with all the Chasers but Flint served as targets for them to show off throwing prowess, with a side bonus the proof of agility the rest of them could give. Flint watched above with a critical eye Draco could feel heavy on him. It was even odds whether that eye would be more critical for Draco, or too terrified to treat him as a normal tryout at all.

Draco's twelve-year-old frame was laughably easy to dodge Bludgers with. Sometimes, he didn't even have to fly to get out of the way, when a twist of his narrow body or a press closer to the broom would do. He loved the mounting frustration it put in the Beaters each time they failed to hit him. *Try having practice matches for years with Vince and Greg, and you'll see what real Beaters look like. None of you are halfway vicious enough.*

Ultimately, as the defensive scrimmage ended, Draco had the satisfaction of remaining unscathed. Handsome Higgs had taken at least three hits. That would have to be slowing him down by now. But Draco was dealt his own hit to shake him, as merciless an impact as any Bludger to the back. The stands were not as empty as he had originally thought. Either their spectator had climbed into place after the start of tryouts, or he had been there all along, lurking in Draco's favorite spot, the shadow that hung depending over the wall by the stands.

It had been the other way around in first year, but now Potter was the one sitting under the shadow, watching.

Too many simultaneous ideas crashed into Draco. *Hermione and I would sit there last year. She must have told him about it.* It was too far away to make out features, but there was no mistaking the Gryffindor robes, dark hair, and glasses reflecting sunlight. They could be there just to watch him, to spy on the whole team, or be there by coincidence, or there to distract or curse him and make sure he failed in some retaliation for the incident with the diary-

The temptation to fly over and tattle about a potential spy died when he saw Flint whispering in Higgs's ear. He seemed to be giving pointers for going against Draco, from the way they kept glancing in Draco's direction. Higgs had always been a distressingly clean player for a Slytherin, but there might be some unusual professional or not-so-professional fouls soon creeping into his repertoire. Draco felt the presence of his wand inside his robe, but if he hexed them, Potter would see, and if he hexed Potter, the Slytherins would see. The only way to take any of them on right now, all united in wanting Draco's failure, was to win on the pitch.

Tryouts for Seekers in Slytherin, apart from participation in the other drills, consisted of a set of three one-on-one games. The other Slytherins flew down and dismounted, staring up from the grass while Flint hovered ready to release the Snitch. If his deal with Father had not been sufficient to reconcile Draco to fighting for a position he had not initially wanted, the collective front of opposition from Slytherin's older players *or* Potter's presence would have proved more than enough motivation to make him burn for it. Burn he did, as he stared Higgs down.

And then they were soaring, pelting right after the spark of gold in the free air, with Higgs's greater weight and strength outbalanced by Draco's superior broom in a race of speed. But the Snitch flew upwards away from both of them. Draco was forced to scan the whole of the pitch for it seconds later, while Higgs went tearing after something he had seen more quickly-

Draco's reflexes sent him hurtling after Higgs before he realized the other boy was moving. He caught up just as the Snitch came into view in front of the east stand, gold against gold dropping down. They went into a dive at about the same time, with Higgs swaying in his direction, elbowing him so hard it nearly shoved him off his broom. But he had been there as Flint personally taught all the dirty tricks he knew. He flattened his body to the broom, with a roll a full circle around in the air instead, gold still before him. The elbow was only added momentum as he careened down past Higgs, whom Draco's barrel roll had blocked from finishing his dive. Draco caught the Snitch glove with an ease that almost made him doubt it had really happened.

Draco caught the Snitch the second time with about the same ease, imagining he could feel Potter's eyes on him the whole time. Though he didn't dare glance to see if he was still there, for fear of the massive distraction Potter posed in pretty much everything. But it added another burst of adrenaline to every move he made, the awareness of Potter judging him, that childishly intoxicating prospect of maybe someday impressing him. It made it easier to spot Higgs's trick feint for what it was, and beat him to the Snitch again after seeing it first this

time. And this was all well and good for Higgs, although it did leave him in danger of losing his spot. It would have remained so, had he not made Draco angry.

A full three or four seconds after Draco's hand had closed securely around the Snitch, Higgs came barreling into him. There was no attempt to stop his momentum, much like a late football tackle in one of the Muggle kicking games Mr. Granger showed him. Draco felt the smash of that sixteen-year-old weight against his ribs, lingering long after Higgs made a perfunctory unconvincing apology. As if he hadn't seen the Snitch was already caught.

Perhaps one had been wrong to let the other second-years off so easy, with there coming to be so little fear for the name of Draco Malfoy in Slytherin house.

That was easy enough to change.

Draco had learned about Higgs's flight style and habits from up close the first two go's, as well as from watching him in the games during his own first year, not once but twice. The fact that he was good-looking just meant that Draco had watched him all the more closely. Between the blows Higgs had taken from the Bludgers, that growing body of data on his opponent, and the fact that Higgs was starting to lose his head, Draco had it all plotted before Flint even let the Snitch go.

He went immediately at a dead race towards the hoops. So quick a dive at the moment the match began sent Higgs into a panic. So desperate, in fact, that Draco didn't even have to fly across to block any attempts to dodge from the incoming hoops. Higgs flew face-first into the topmost all by himself. And Draco would be lying if he said he didn't enjoy the sound of that handsome face knocking blisteringly hard against the hoop, before Higgs was thrown back by the impact and fell unconscious from his broom, and Draco was free to leisurely drift down and snag the Snitch where it had been hovering near the ground the entire time.

Flint and the others were staring at the fallen body of Higgs instead, who they had not been fast enough to keep from hitting the ground. Draco offered Flint the Snitch with a level face, before crouching down over Higgs. "Enervate," Draco said, and Higgs's eyes flickered dazedly open. Draco could see his nose was broken at a minimum, with more perhaps in his body cracked by the fall. There was no telling whether this would keep Higgs out of Quidditch even in the short-term, with the miracles of magical medicine. But Draco thought he had made his point nonetheless. And he felt a shameful rush when he stole a glance up at the stands, and Potter was still there.

Draco cornered Potter the next day after breakfast, when he was so foolish as to wander off without any fellow Gryffindors in tow. "Heading somewhere special, Potter?" he hissed, pulling Potter behind a statue in the courtyard. "In a rush, are we? What, Hufflepuff running their tactics today?" He was reminded of the cabinet with this proximity, but he couldn't simply let this go, at least not without letting Potter know he had not observed without being observed himself. "Or if you were just watching *me*, Potter, I regret to inform you you're heading in the wrong direction, much as it will come as a shock, because I am going to the *library*."

Potter just blinked at him, as caught off guard as Draco had hoped by his ambush, but that did leave him non-communicative even for a Gryffindor. "Oh, come on, if you didn't think I was going to notice you yesterday, lurking in the shadows like-"

"Your hair is getting longer," Potter interrupted, staring at him in the strangest way, "Than it was in Diagon Alley. I mean, I thought you would have cut it since, but you haven't."

Informing Potter of his plans to cut it at the chin and wear it in the style Severus did would hardly engender much good will between them.

"Um," Draco said, and stepped as far back as he could while remaining behind the large stone griffin statue. "Well, yes, it is. Longer. Hair, it does that. Grows." And he liked to mock *Potter's* difficulties with the English language. "I understand the mop of shaggy fur atop your head partakes in stranger activities, Potter, perhaps detaching itself and forming search parties to forage for small insects to feed Scabbers, but in a normal human, hair does proceed accordingly."

"What?" went Potter.

"Scabbers, Ron's rat," Draco went irritably.

"I know Scabbers is Ron's rat," Potter retorted, before raking a hand through that aforementioned mop that made it look far better than something so uncivilized had any right to, possibly because the effect of fluffing and pushing it back over his forehead kept highlighting his eyes. "I just- *what* are you on about?"

"Do you have an explanation for your spying, Potter, or must I go to my Quidditch captain about this? Or perhaps your Head of House would be gratified to hear you-"

"Your captain," Potter interrupted. "So you made the team? You're their Seeker now?"

Draco wondered with an awful speeding of his heart if that was why Potter had been there, to try and see if Draco would make it as Seeker. Draco had been giving Hermione regular updates on that front, mapping out his path to Quidditch glory. Maybe she'd told Potter, or maybe Potter had gone back to eavesdropping on their library table again.

"What do you think, Potter?" Draco drawled. "Was there ever any doubt?"

Potter's eyes flashed, the luminous effect from their excessive greenness making them lashing in the shadows. "Well, you do have that new broom your father bought you that no one else had."

Potter trying to be cutting wasn't ever very successful, compared to the practiced efforts of Slytherins, but it still put a damper on Draco's thrill of victory. "What, are you suggesting everyone else on Slytherin should have a Nimbus 2001 too? Because I could have gotten my father to buy all of us one if I wanted."

"You say that like you think it will impress me."

Draco had been making that mistake since the day he met Potter in the blue loop, up apparently to today without ever learning. He kept thinking things that would impress *him* would work the same on Saint Potter. But it just drove Potter further towards dislike, while trying for the opposite.

"I'm saying," Draco said levelly, "That if you want to attribute my success to a superior broom, fine, but you *know* I'm a good flier. And you won't be so confident it's *just* my broom, once you've had to face me in a real game." Gryffindors didn't tend to follow implications well, so Draco finished by adding, "I'll blow you out of the water."

Potter glared just the way Draco remembered from second year, none of the heat removed. "You're dreaming."

"What," Draco drawled, "Like *you* were dreaming, Potter, when you wrote me all those lovely messages this summer? Dreaming that I would write you back some sweet little love letters? That hurt your precious feelings, didn't it, that I didn't respond to your *fascinating* reports on the unending stupidity of your Muggles. Did it make you feel bad that I-"

"Shut up, Draco," Potter hissed. "You *should* have written me at least once, to check in after you stirred up my aunt and uncle against me. Or did you just mess with them for your own amusement? I can't believe you didn't write to me at all..."

"You seemed to enjoy it when I menaced your Muggles," Draco countered. "And from what you wrote, sounds like they left you alone more than usual. No thanks for that, and nothing for saving Girl Weasley's hide either? My, when the sages speak of Gryffindor honor and courage, they do slack off on cataloging their *ingratitude*-"

"Of course we're glad nothing happened to Ginny!" Potter raked a hand through his hair again. He put that hand on Draco's shoulder after, as if he was due to try and flee at any moment, when Draco had been the one to hunt Potter down. "But she wouldn't have been in danger if it wasn't for your *family*, we all know it was even if you won't admit it- because you won't tell us things, not even Hermione! You really hurt *her* feelings, you know that? She had you with *her* family, and she tells you everything, and now none of us feel like we know you at all-"

"*You* know me," Draco said, a lump in his throat he detested himself for having. "You said you did. Once. That the front I put on didn't fool you. Because you saw me in Ollivander's."

"You told me about it then," Potter said, realization only apparently coming just now. Merlin, Draco could have wept for the future of the Wizarding world if their savior remained this criminally dense. "You said you didn't want the wand you had, and your parents weren't happy, but there was no fixing it, because the wand chooses the wizard." A startlingly good memory, Potter had. Should Draco be flattered? "And you told me I didn't need to worry, that I would get a great wand-"

"Because you're Harry Potter, yes," Draco finished, resisting any sentimentality in himself.

"Had you found out your aunt's wand chose you? Did you not want it? It was a mistake but you were stuck with it anyway?"

"My aunt was a murderous psychopath *lunatic*, Potter, of course I didn't want her bloody wand," Draco hissed, with a rush of pique at the thought of how wrong the Gryffindors were, if they imagined him some carefully prepared dark wizard, ceremonially granted his evil ancestor's dread wand in some ritual ceremony under the full moon or some rubbish. He could only *wish* becoming a Death Eater had involved such rigorous training procedures last time. Mainly, it had just involved Aunt Bella casting the Cruciatus curse on him a lot. And demanding an extra-lavish Christmas present that year for her troubles. She'd always liked snow globes.

"I don't want the wand, Potter. Who would? But my magic wouldn't respond to any of the wands at Ollivander's. My father thought I was a Squib it was so bad. I don't *want* to be carrying around a wand that did things like this did, but it's that or no magic at all-"

"I didn't realize. I'm sorry, Draco. I'm really, really sorry," Potter said with more sympathy in his eyes, and Draco couldn't have that. "We shouldn't have ganged up on you like that. Ron and Hermione were mad at me for calling you out in front of the teachers- but, Draco, it's just so hard when you keep secrets from us. Especially when it's Ron's sister who's in danger... I wish you would just tell me these things, so I can *help* you-"

Damn Potter and that early but persistent savior complex. "There's no helping me with my wand, Potter." *Or with my father.* "I mean, thanks for not telling anyone about that. Hope you keep that up. But it's not going to change. So if that's a dealbreaker for our casual group study partnership..." Draco refused to call it a friendship. "Just let me know and I'll be happy to stay out of your way-"

"I don't want that at all!" Potter exclaimed, raking a hand through his hair in agitation. "I just want to know you, Draco. Even... even the bad things, and if you have to keep secrets for your father, I can try and understand, if you'll just try and *explain* it to me... Draco, I want to be *around* you, I wanted you to be Slytherin Seeker so we could play each other..."

Okay, that was far too much sentiment coming out now. "I didn't ask for Severus to be made my godfather either, by the way," he added more coldly, forestalling the gushing. Potter stepped back.

"I still can't wrap my head around that part," he groaned. "He's so mean to me all the time, and you've never said anything? I guess he's always nice to you- well, I hope he is... I mean, I guess it makes sense why you're so devoted to him- sometimes I used to wonder if you had a *crush* on him-"

"On *Severus*?" Draco gasped, and would have been well within his rights to cast Langlock on Potter for speaking such rubbish. "I've known him all my life. He might as well be my father. Except more intelligent, funnier, and far less likely to brawl with Weasleys in bookshops."

"You think Snape's *funny*?" Potter went incredulously, then frowned, like lots of things were starting to fall in place for him now. "You two do kind of talk the same. And have the same sense of humor sometimes. I mean, when you're making fun of me."

"Why would you think I fancied a professor?"

"No, just- I just wondered is all," Potter said, fidgeting, "Because you seemed so sure you were gay, so I thought you must have someone you fancy to be that positive. And he was pretty much the only male in the castle you willingly ever spent time with-"

"One," Draco said, "You're making me gag, so stop. And two, how is it any business of yours who I fancy anyway, unless you're on the hunt for rivals because *you* fancy me, in which case, I can only marvel at the clumsiness of your seduction techniques."

Potter went so beet red, the heat his skin radiated was practically warming *Draco's* face. "I don't, um, don't, really-" Potter stammered. "I don't, um, I definitely don't, uh, fancy you," and then in a flash of panicked Chosen One, he was fleeing the courtyard like it had filled with Dementors.

"Glad we cleared that up, Potter!" Draco called cheerfully after him.

The next afternoon in the library, Potter and Ron were sitting with Hermione at their study table. Draco counted that as the weekend's fourth victory.

It was almost peaceful, until Ron poked his head up from his book, and said all in a rush, "Okay, one, I'm sorry, and two, I've been so curious, wow, is it true you really fancy Cedric Diggory?"

"WHAT?" Potter screamed, and everyone at nearby tables turned to stare.

Damn it. Was he going to have to Langlock half his year in Slytherin? Well, he supposed anyone could have overheard them at the table. He'd leave it at that.

"Don't you dare get us kicked out!" Hermione hissed. "If I can't do my research for Charms essay properly-"

"You'll fail the class, get expelled, and end up having to work on the Knight Bus?" Draco offered.

"The what?" Hermione frowned, but Ron was relentless.

"Do you, Draco?" Ron urged. "Do you, do you?"

"*Forgive* you, Ron?" Draco scoffed. "Oh, hardly. Not even close, you sister-obsessed simpleton. You're lucky you haven't been downgraded from Ron back to Weasley."

"No, do you fancy Cedric Diggory?" Ron persisted. Both he and Harry leaned in, all ears.

"I don't know, maybe," Draco deadpanned. "I *am* a big fan of the way he straddles a broomstick."

Harry and Hermione blinked at him guilelessly. "You mean that he's a good Seeker?" Hermione asked, while Ron had to cover his mouth from wheezing, he was laughing so hard.

"Bloody hell, Draco, I missed you," Ron gasped, while Harry started to look madder and madder.

"What? I don't get it!" Harry protested, looking around in vain for someone to explain it to him. "Hermione, do you get it?" She shook her head. "Hey!" he whined in despair. "*Hey*! What's the *joke*?"

The Diary in the Fire

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"Lockhart?" Draco marveled, while Hermione shrunk into herself. "You have a crush on *Lockhart*?"

Red-faced, she began to play with the newest charm on her bracelet, a Medusa head beside the Kali yantra. It was a nervous habit of hers to play with the snakes on it, compulsively tracing and stroking at each, and all the more so when the others teased her. "It's not a *crush*, Frankenstein," she insisted crossly.

"It's totally a crush," Ron said eagerly, leaning forward in his excitement to mock Hermione. "She surrounded all his classes with hearts in her timetable." Draco made gagging noises, miming a fit of debilitating nausea, and saw Potter try to hide a smile. "And that's not all! She knew all the answers on that quiz about him-"

"What?" Draco asked indignantly. He'd known that quiz was coming, but forgotten to study for it. "I *failed* that quiz! And Defense is one of my better subjects!" Hermione gave him a sourer look at it, as conversely, Defense was one of her worst. Except perhaps not this year.

"She won points for Gryffindor," Ron laughed, "Because she was the only one to know some of them! And she keeps saying he's a good teacher, even after he couldn't deal with the pixies and left the three of us to clean them all up- and he keeps trying to teach Harry about publicity, and thinks he's so fame-hungry, and Hermione says he's just trying to be a good mentor to him!"

"Wait," Draco said slowly. It was one thing for Hermione to be seized with pubertal hormones. Salazar knew he was having a bit of an experience with them, thrust abruptly into regularly showering with 16-year-old Slytherin athletes and expected not to stare, much less have any other kind of reaction. But for them to overwhelm her to the point where she placed them over the integrity of her studies? "You think he's a good *professor*?" Hermione nodded primly, and Draco checked Ron and Potter's faces to be sure she wasn't having him on. "You've got to be kidding me."

"It's mental," Ron agreed, "He's almost as bad as Quirrell," and Potter nodded in agreement.

"Worse," Draco said, "He's worse than Quirrell, and that's saying something." He lowered his voice. "I reckon Quirrell would have had a fair shot at being a decent teacher, stutter and all, if he didn't have the darkest wizard in history camped out on the back of his head. At least in

comparison to *Lockhart.* It's not actually that funny, though. Because we're missing out on a year of real Defense instruction. And we could need that someday, you know?"

"Yeah," Potter muttered. "If your father decides to go after Ron's family again."

So yes, there was still some lingering suspicion and tension, which Draco expected to ramp up as the Gryffindor-Slytherin match neared in November. But eventually, they would realize it was Draco to whom they owed this unprecedentedly peaceful year, and act accordingly. Without the Chamber of Secrets, there could be a normal year for once. No Philosopher's Stone under the floorboards, no Dementors roaming the grounds, no Goblet of Fire, no Umbridge nailing up decrees and tossing Dumbledore out while Potter plotted sedition. No *vanishing cabinet.* Maybe with some time to live a normal life and grow as a person, Potter wouldn't grow up as insufferable as last time.

And the sacrifice Draco had made in their esteem to accomplish this wasn't permanent. It was one of those long-term gains after short-term suffering, which he was trying to convince himself were valuable. With time, he would win the Gryffindors fully back. Though that shouldn't be what he wanted, given how one of his goals for the year was to keep distance from Ron and Potter. But apart from making the Quidditch team, which had occasioned his one civil letter exchange with Father to date, he was not doing well with those goals. Least of all getting over his obsession with Potter, who still had the power to drive him to the point of tears with a single syllable.

Maybe, when enough time had passed, if the Gryffindors had all sufficiently demonstrated their repentance for ever doubting him, he would even be so magnanimous as to occasionally refer to Ron or Potter by the title of friend.

He counted them friend enough to keep them updated on the saga of the diary, which he learned of through Severus, though these updates seemed to undermine rather than enhance their trust in him. By the start of October, Severus conveyed that the professors had determined, without a doubt, that the diary was an extremely dangerous dark artifact that should be destroyed.

Its dangerousness had subsequently been proved by eerie resistance to attempts to destroy it, as ordinary means of destruction proved useless. Whether it was blades, water, or fire, nothing they attempted kept it from showing up relatively quickly after in exactly the shape it had been before the attempt. Severus was subsequently given the diary as his personal project, which Draco honestly thought he seemed to rather enjoy. And all the tests, however useless, with different venomous substances and corrosive agents Severus brewed or directed Draco to concoct gave excellent excuses for Draco to hang around with Severus and watch or assist.

"Careful," Draco liked to tell him facetiously, to earn the most exquisite of Severus's glares. "If you don't start showing results soon, sir, they might feel themselves forced to turn to the superior Dark Arts knowledge of Professor Lockhart."

And Severus in turn liked to declare his godson a massive impediment, to the point of complaining Draco was at fault for his lack of real progress. But it was a throwaway comment of Draco's that seemed to finally grant Severus the inspiration he needed. Another

combination of poisons to soak the diary for it only to regenerate in time within the stasis bubble Severus had set it, and Severus released the shield in frustration to toss it into his room's charmed green fire. Draco stared into the flames as they flickered and felt one of his worst memories threaten to overtake his present. "Sir, have you considered Fiendfyre?"

Severus's head whipped so sharply around Draco could practically hear it. "You shouldn't even know what that is, Draco." Draco gave him a sharp look in turn- surely if *Vince* had been able to cast it by seventh-year, it couldn't be that rare or difficult. Though admittedly, that had probably owed a great deal to the educational excellence of the Carrows at Hogwarts.

"I'd never cast it," Draco said hurriedly, "It's awful. It *sounds* awful," he amended. "I was just thinking of things I'd *read* about, you know, that sounded the most destructive."

Severus frowned before waving a hand at him dismissively. "Out!" he barked, which was a sign Severus might have gotten an idea.

Fiendfyre left Draco's head after a time, drowned out by the rain that poured down on Slytherin during nearly every practice that autumn, merciful only to the extent it seemed to pour down the same on Gryffindor as well. Draco's prowess with cleaning spells was not one Potter shared. It was more than a few times that Draco caught the memorable sight of him with his crimson robes drenched right to his body, a second skin like he would molt into a phoenix, or more comically tracking mud into the castle, dirt and grass and rain covering him even after changing out of his robes and showering.

Draco should have been on his best behavior after the diary incident, but something in him never let him miss a chance to shout out and let Potter see he had noticed his pathetic bedraggled state. Once, he overheard Potter complaining to Ron, "No matter how I try, I always seem to end up looking like an idiot in front of Draco."

Potter's slovenliness had serious consequences in time, when Filch caught him at his mud-tracking. Potter only narrowly escaped his office, due to a story involving some incomprehensible combination of coincidences, multiple ghosts, and blackmail. Draco didn't bother trying to follow it, just joined Ron in mercilessly mocking Potter for being a celebrity even to ghosts. It was so thoroughly enjoyable that Draco began to consider formally extending the title of friend to Ron, leaving only Potter behind in the doldrums of 'study partner/Hermione's hanger-on'.

Once Draco had started to get to know Ron as more than an annoyingly ginger presence at their table, it had been a bewildering realization that Ron *resented* Potter, for all his fame and fortune and talent and general odious perfectness. If Potter hadn't minded a jealous best friend, he might as well have just taken up Draco's offer of friendship the first time. Granted, Draco could see why Ron would be so envious, given his inferiority to Potter in nearly every possible way, at least on the surface. But Draco didn't know, then, how Ron had survived those seven years in the past spent serving at Potter's side like some prison reformer's substitute for Azkaban, thrown again and again into the crucible of steadily worsening jealousy.

Draco had suffered it from a rival's distance and had barely borne it, not to speak of how it must feel from a best friend's perspective, without even the rival's right to openly resent. But Draco's own once-virulent envy against Potter had been tempered, perhaps by the proof by Voldemort's defeat that Potter really deserved all his accolades, or the discovery Potter hated his fame. Or maybe it was just his own experience of notoriety at Hogwarts this time, albeit in the form of a cultivated reverent fear, which had only increased after Terence Higgs spent the week after Slytherin tryouts in the Hospital Wing. It had unluckily taken so long to have his bones fixed that even Severus hadn't believed Draco's claims he hadn't cursed him along with making the hoop feint.

So Draco took pains to include Ron in his mockery of Potter, though it was less poison-tipped than last time. He was sure to point out the ridiculousness inherent in the hysterical adulation that trailed Potter in the form of fans like Creevey, adulation that would only increase in years to come. But as the date of Gryffindor-Slytherin neared, the poor Weasley pined worse and worse for a spot on the Gryffindor team for himself as well, one that would be years in coming. It was clear for anyone to see how bitter Ron felt, not that Potter or Hermione seemed to notice or care.

What seemed to soften Ron's jealousy, then, was Draco's invitation to practice with him on his night flights. Upon Draco's ascension to Seeker, Severus had increased his blanket permission to extend from Friday to Sunday. Granted, Ron spent the first night with his wand out half the time, looking convinced Draco would curse him to fall to his death. But by the first Sunday, he was joyfully repelling Draco's poor Quaffle throws with the swagger of sixth-year Weasley vs. Slytherin.

"You're not *irredeemably* terrible, you know," Draco drawled at the end of that practice, flexing his wrists with a wince at the uncomfortable and mostly useless efforts he'd made with the Quaffle. "Color me astonished, but you aren't. You just don't have much confidence, do you? And I suppose it didn't help how you kept expecting me to start casting Unforgivables on you."

"I was next to the hoop," Ron said defensively, taking Draco's broom from him at the sign of Draco's discomfort as they walked back to the shed. "Everyone knows that's where you hexed the old Slytherin Seeker. *I* don't know that that's not just how you always play Quidditch!"

"I didn't hex him!" Draco protested. "It was a perfectly well-executed feint! I don't know why everyone thinks I cursed him!"

Ron snorted and put the brooms back in their slots with two clean smacks. "Oh, yeah. Suppose it's one of the hazards of cursing people. People start getting around to thinking you might, you know, *curse people*."

Ron gave the Nimbus 2001 his customary longing glance as they left. Draco might have let him ride it sometimes, honestly, if he weren't afraid Ron would somehow snap it. He remembered Ron's broken wand in second year, and the beautiful sight of Ron cursing himself to vomit slugs, that to this day comprised one of his top life experiences. Granted, Draco's interventions seemed somehow to have prevented that, as there had been no flying car flight into the Whomping Willow this year, but he still wouldn't trust Ron around any

valuable property. And Keeper was a position that inherently didn't tend to need the world's fastest broom to perform well.

Ron's subsequent bragging about his growing skills at Keeper soon had Potter foaming at the mouth with poorly disguised jealousy. Draco's flippant dismissals of his requests to join them were making him more and more fuming. "Can't, Potter," he would tell him nonchalantly each time, "I'm playing *you* in Quidditch, not him," and let Ron smirk, from having taken one advantage from *not* being on the Gryffindor team. Ron got to share Draco's special dispensation to go out and fly on weekend nights, and Potter got to sulk in the Gryffindor common room by himself.

And Ron didn't seem to envy Potter's fame when it netted him an invitation to Nearly Headless Nick's Deathday Party, which he had felt compelled to accept after Nick's assistance with Filch. Apparently, even a ghost was all agog at the prospect of showing off to his friends that he knew Famous Harry Potter.

"A Deathday Party?" said Hermione keenly, when Potter had changed and joined them in the Gryffindor common room. The fact that they had started bringing Draco back in was a better sign than any of how much ground he had regained with them, especially when Girl Weasley went by squeaking at the sight of Draco and fleeing like a banshee was on her trail. Ron didn't go protective over his sister, just rolled his eyes in her direction while Hermione went on talking. "Bet there aren't many living people who can say they've been to one of those- it'll be fascinating!"

"Why would anyone want to celebrate the day they died?" said Ron, who was struggling so mightily with his Potions homework that Draco was tempted to put him out of his misery and do it for him, if it weren't for the precedent it would set. "Sounds dead depressing to me..."

The Weasley twins had also cooled in their ire towards Draco, though they were no more likely to speak to him than they had been before. Which was a shame, really, since as Draco noticed with them nearby doing unholy things to a salamander, his growing twelve-year-old hormones found them rather fit. Draco dragged his gaze away from either Fred or George- he could never tell which was the marked-for-death one- shoving fireworks into the hapless amphibian's jaw, and offered his own unique perspective. "If I was a ghost, for my Deathday, I wouldn't celebrate with a party. I'd just save my best haunting for that day, for whoever killed me. Or whoever was the nastiest to me before I died." Draco remembered Myrtle's grudge against that Olive Hornby with a grin. "Maybe something involving honey and badgers, if they happened to be a Hufflepuff."

He smirked to himself as Hermione made outraged faces at him, flicked the Medusa charm at her wrist, and wondered if Moaning Myrtle ever celebrated her Deathday.

And then the salamander exploded, as shocking a result as that was from a creature stuffed with fireworks, and the kind of undignified chaos erupted in the common room that Draco had never seen once in eight or nine full years in Slytherin, depending on how you counted. It was hard to deny a part of him didn't prefer this common room, however gauche the color scheme.

Draco might have been afraid, thinking of Halloween while knowing how it had gone last time. But he had no reason to be afraid anymore. Not with Severus the one he was counting on to make everything right.

It was a night not long before Halloween that Severus sent for him. It was disconcerting to feel the strength of Severus's Legilimency was such that he could reach out through so many stone dungeon walls and poke at a sleeping Draco's mind to alert him, but he comforted himself that just brushing it to get his attention and actually breaching it were different things entirely. If Severus had seen anything important in Draco's mind, he wouldn't be keeping it secret from Dumbledore, let alone letting Draco in as the confidant to observe his personal war against the indestructible diary.

It had been a pleasant surprise for Draco to find Severus's wards had continued to let him into his storerooms after the dittany incident on the first day of Hogwarts. They let Draco into Severus's rooms as well. He could walk right in, and found Severus standing before his fire with the diary in hand. There was one immediately visible difference: the charmed fire was not green, but a standard orange-red flame again.

"I warn you, there's a Slytherin out of bed after curfew," Draco quipped absently, "His Head of House must surely feel compelled to dock him points," but his eyes were only for the fire. "What's this, Severus? Why is it different?"

"Excellent observational skills," Severus said dryly, "Although one expects those skills may be faced with greater challenges someday than a discolored flame. Take this." He pulled a small orange-red vial out of his pocket, whose glass was unusually thick and cloudy, with a stopper of pure lead. Its label read Liquid Fiendfyre. "A new invention of mine. Fiendfyre could not be safely unleashed inside the castle-" You could not have paid Draco to suggest the Room of Requirement. "And I found it imprecise for my purposes. But a look at the magical theory behind Fiendfyre showed it ideal for the most potent molecular destruction, and so I have spent the past weeks isolating each string of magic in Fiendfyre, and replicating it in potion form. Care to make any guesses as to this new brew's composition?"

Draco couldn't even keep his eyes for long on the little vial without feeling his body start to grow clammy with panic, but even looking away was not of much use when Severus's question forced him to start remembering its effects more personally. "Uh... I don't know, sir. Dragon poison? Or dragon blood, I don't know. Because the flame can have pseudo-sentience, and it would take the forms of dragons, serpents, and chimeras... I don't know which ingredients you would pick from serpents, and what there could be at all for chimeras-erm, maybe a simulated hybrid of lion, goat, and a different dragon..."

There was a touch at his mental shields, just one at the smooth surface of an imagined obsidian dagger, as Severus came to regard him with as much critical doubt as the diary or potion. "You almost speak as though you have seen it, Draco."

Draco shrugged uncomfortably. "Like I said, sir, I've read about it."

"For chimeras, a chimera egg," Severus intoned, "Very difficult if not impossible, to procure any other ingredient from them. For a snake, the egg was-"

"Ashwinder?"

"Naturally." Severus sounded unimpressed. "And the dragon?"

Draco racked his brain. "A Hungarian Horntail? Because its flames are the largest?"

"Not a terrible guess," Severus intoned, which Draco took as high praise. "But no, Draco. The Peruvian Vipertooth."

"Source of dragon pox," Draco blurted. "So... because it's the most poisonous to humans?"

"Exactly," Severus agreed, "And its latent venom adheres to the antinomy in the potion."

"What other ingredients are there, sir?"

"You have heard more than enough," Severus warned. "I have come to know you much better at Hogwarts than I did before, Draco. And I know better now than to suspect you will never wish to replicate this recipe. If this invention proves successful, it is dangerous enough I will be forced to keep it secret, most especially from second-years prone to recklessness. Nor will I tell you of the means to secure the eggs or the procedure to prepare them. The only procedure you must hear is the one we will use to destroy this diary."

"Shields?" Draco said quickly, and Severus gave him a sharp look.

"Always so eager to show off your knowledge, Draco," Severus sighed. "Becoming a know-it-all like your Gryffindor sweetheart? One hopes you do not behave as such in your other classes." Hardly. Draco still spoke as little as possible, both to avoid drawing attention to himself, and because he found it added to his mystique with the other students. "Yes, Draco, shields. I have already begun the preparation of a multi-layered shield bubble around the fireplace, with a rune to verbally activate it, once the flame is infused with liquid Fiendfyre." A flick of Severus's wand and a low muttering, and Draco found his face surrounded by a sort of envelope in the air. "A bubble-head charm. We will both use them, in case of poisonous fumes escaping the shields. Now, Draco, I am allowing you to witness this as a privilege, for the action you took in bringing the diary initially to our attention. But if you feel yourself at all unready to witness such a dangerous procedure..."

"I am," Draco blurted, "I mean, I'm not, I'm not ready, I don't want to be around the Fiendfyre," and Severus stared at him with a level of surprise unusual on his long sallow face. Draco felt like the worst kind of coward, maybe even disappointing his godfather, but he trusted Severus to judge whether or not the diary was destroyed. And besides, just the flicker of the flames in that moment across Severus's usually familiar face was making him look like a demon, a moment away from his head turning to a dragon or snake or chimera's.

With a frown, a flick of Severus's wand undid the bubble-head charm. The fact he had already cast it showed how little he expected Draco to lose his nerve at the final hurdle, when Draco had so determinedly inserted himself into the proceedings at every other turn. "It is, indeed, massively dangerous. In that case, I would ask you to remove yourself completely back to the Slytherin dungeons before I begin."

As Draco fled Severus's rooms, there was no hallucination like on the Hogwarts Express in his first year, but nor did he feel as though the Fiendfyre he imagined flaring to life inside Severus's shields was leaving him untouched. There was a curious kind of heat at his heels, a flickering warmth that only seemed to grow with each step he took away, as if the strength of whatever made the heat was growing and beginning to pursue him the way Fiendfyre did, licking at the back of his calves but still at something of a distance. Each time he turned, though, casting Lumos and even a Protego behind him several times in the darkness, nothing was following but his own shadow.

He felt no such heat, which he told himself had only been a subtler illusion, once he had climbed into his bed. He changed back to his pajamas, and cast the usual protections before seizing Imoogi and burying his face in her. He tried to feel nothing but her worn cloth softness, the smell of her familiar mustiness, nothing of the blue loop, nothing of the horrors he knew full well lived only in his head. But his head, as it turned out, was a place he could not leave, any more than his body. Less, as his own incomplete form of time travel to the red line had shown him. He could go anywhere in any time and not be free of the contents of his own head.

The next morning, Severus informed him that, at the cost of Severus's fireplace, the liquid Fiendfyre had finally proved a success, and decimated every trace of the diary for good.

The Deathday Party

Chapter Notes

Playlist

After the number of times they'd had to announce there was a Gryffindor at the door for him, you would think Draco's yearmates would have gotten used to it by now. But any of the boys forced to go retrieve Draco from his bed cocoon would always seem irritated. "Feel lucky you still have a working tongue to inform me, Zabini," Draco casually informed Blaise, who was quite quiet and humble for the rest of their walk to the entrance.

Draco made a face when he saw it was Potter.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"They only tell me it's a Gryffindor," Draco sighed. "That's more than disgusting enough for them. I never know which one until I open the door."

"Is that why you look like that when you see it's me?" Potter complained. "What, are you always hoping it'll be Hermione?"

"Or, given that it's a weekend night, Ron coming to set a time for flying, but I presume he'll be too busy with pointless Halloween revelry to join me," Draco sighed. He hated himself for the butterflies it still hadn't ceased to put in his stomach, the sight of Potter leaned against the threshold of Slytherin's stone entrance, making such a disgruntled little face at him.

"So anyone but me, you mean," Potter muttered, before seeming to rally. "Well, um, too bad, it's me, um, Harry Potter-" Draco bit back a laugh. As if he didn't know his bloody name. "And I was wondering, er, if you'd like to go with me to Nearly Headless Nick's Deathday Party?"

"Why, Potter," Draco drawled, keeping his voice low so no one in the common room would hear, but unable to resist the chance to needle at Potter. "Are you asking me on a date? And you didn't bring flowers? It takes a great deal more than a famous name, you know, to court a *Malfoy*-"

"Shut up, Draco," Potter hissed, turning that adorable shade of beet red Draco loved to bring out in him. "I mean with me and Ron and Hermione, they're coming too, so it's not like that at all, okay?"

"Sounds like a double date to me," Draco quipped.

"It's a *Deathday* Party!" Potter hissed. "All- I don't know, cobwebs and shadows and freaky dead stuff! Nothing romantic, alright?"

"Sounds like seduction to a Slytherin," Draco couldn't resist saying, before he had to take pity after watching a speechless Potter seem to slowly melt down towards the dungeon floor. "Alright, fine, Potter, I'll come. The one problem is that with me absent from the Halloween feast, all the Slytherins will think I'm off setting my troll out into the dungeons again."

Potter squinted doubtfully. "But that was really Professor Quirrell, wasn't it?"

Gratifying, after so many fruitless months trying to convince this lot it hadn't been Severus, to see they had finally gotten the message. "Yes, but they don't know that, do they?" Draco considered. "I'll have to give a public service announcement. Hey! Slytherins!" He turned, casting a Sonorus on himself, and let his voice boom out across the common room, and maybe all the way to the dorm. "You are all hereby informed that there will be no troll in the dungeons this Halloween. I will be absent at the Halloween feast, but for reasons unrelated to dark troll magicks. Please feel no need to panic or begin securing your possessions. I repeat, there will be no Malfoy troll. Finite incantatem," Draco finished, and turned brightly to Potter. "Okay, when is this party?"

Potter was just staring at him with this dazed expression, which really brought out the hugeness of his green eyes. "Sometimes, Draco, I think you're the strangest person I've ever met."

Draco blinked, and leaned in to whisper, "You've met the *Dark Lord*."

Potter pulled back to raise an eyebrow as if to say, *Your point being*?

It was a shame for Potter to make him laugh so hard before he even left the Slytherin common room. It wouldn't do to let people start thinking Draco enjoyed Potter's company.

They went back up to the Great Hall, for Potter to take a last wistful look at all of the decorations he would not be enjoying. They found Ron and Hermione with Hagrid, admiring one of the pumpkins he'd just finished bringing in, larger almost than Hagrid himself. "Guess again," he was saying to Ron and Hermione eagerly. "What do yeh think it is, then?"

"I don't know, Hagrid," Hermione said, staring at the abstract winged shape cut in relief into the pumpkin and towered well over her head. "It's really not a raven? Or a griffin?"

"A Thestral," Draco guessed, as he and Potter joined them.

"No, it's somethin' yeh cain't find in Hogwarts," Hagrid hinted, and Draco found himself stumped but entertained, watching the savior of the Wizarding world be equally stumped by Hagrid's artistic self-expression, too polite to admit it was impossible to tell what it was meant to be.

"A dragon," Ron said, scratching his head, which seemed a fairly good guess with Hagrid.

At Hagrid shaking his head, though, Draco leaned his hand on Ron's shoulder and presented a comically disappointed face to him. "Really, Ron? How can you say there are no dragons at Hogwarts when I'm right here?" He could hear Severus calling him *Vain boy* in his head, but it made Hagrid laugh, at the acknowledgment of his nickname for Draco. "That's almost as rude as saying there aren't any Horklumps at Hogwarts, when Potter's standing right next to me."

Hagrid started laughing so hard tears came out of his eyes, while the others looked mystified, with Hermione clearly furious at something she didn't know. "What's a Horklump?" she demanded.

"Eh, yeh is a funny 'un, little dragon," Hagrid laughed. "Final guesses, alright?"

"An Occamy," said Draco.

"A Horklump!" Ron tried bravely, and earned himself a dirty look from Potter.

"A Hippogriff," Hermione ventured.

Her face burst in a brilliant smile when Hagrid announced, "Correct! Good on yeh, Hermione! Now go on an' enjoy the feast, you lot."

"I wish," Ron muttered, but it was that stubborn loyalty of his that seemed to drag him down to the dungeons to accompany Potter, unlike Draco who had simply had nothing better to do.

And of course Hermione was thrilled about the whole thing. "This is so much more interesting than just going to the Halloween feast again," she enthused. "Just think of the stories we might hear about the history of Hogwarts! Ghosts are such a repository of the wisdom of the ages-"

"Save that sort of talk for Nick," Potter sighed. "He needs a lot of ego-boosting, that one."

The passageway leading to Nearly Headless Nick's party had been lined with candles too, though the effect was far from cheerful: these were long, thin, jet-black tapers, all burning bright blue, casting a dim, ghostly light even over their own living faces. The temperature dropped with every step they took, and Draco hadn't been lying to Potter, this really wouldn't be the worst setting for a first date in his book. He smugly watched the others shiver, and then flinch away from the screeching noises. Some people had such a narrow sense of aesthetics.

"Is that supposed to be music?" Ron whispered. Nearly Headless Nick was standing at a doorway hung with black velvet drapes, and seemed ecstatic to see Potter, though he tried to play it off calmly, and put his solemn face back on soon enough.

"My dear friends," he said mournfully, "Welcome, welcome... so pleased you could come..."

He swept off his plumed hat and bowed them inside, and Draco was instantly glad to have gone here, rather than the same dull Halloween feast as always with the Slytherin yearmates he had to actively try not to let know him, for fear they would see through him. Here, everyone was translucent, the radiant opal-white of Mother's finest pearls. It made Draco

think of the Danse Macabre, but he supposed it was more elegant still to have a dance floor full of ghosts than mere skeletons. An orchestra on a platform arrayed in black velvet drapes played a number of musical saws, which was not the most melodious of sounds, but better than the feast with its inane screeching of bats. Draco enjoyed the sight and even feel of the mist that accompanied this more mysterious tableau- he'd have expected something far more plebeian from the Gryffindor ghost, someone from another house must have done the planning- but it was cold enough for him to cast a warming charm immediately on himself, and then on the other three.

"Focillo. Focillo. Focillo. Accio mink," Draco cast, and in a moment, a thick and glossy silver-pearl mink wrap came flying to him from his room not too far away in the dungeons, wrapping itself warmly around his neck with a flick of his wand once it arrived. From the looks that earned him from the Gryffindors, he doubted he would be losing his title of the strangest person Potter had met anytime soon. "What?" he sniffed. "Some people just don't appreciate fashion."

"Shall we have a look around?" Harry suggested, wanting to warm up his feet.

"Careful not to walk through anyone," said Ron nervously, and they set off around the edge of the dance floor. It would be easy for any onlooker to tell which of them were getting into the spirit of things- read, him and Hermione- and which two were just refusing to have a good time.

"Look at that chandelier," Hermione breathed, pointing to the great midnight blue one above them with countless black candles. "It looks just like a few of the ones in Malfoy Manor."

"It does," Draco agreed, to Ron's face of utter disgust, and Potter's slight but unmistakable look of repressed envy. Neither looked any happier when Draco stopped to greet his House ghost, the Bloody Baron, who clearly creeped them out. "What?" Draco said after they passed. "It's only polite." Ron made a face and nearly stumbled into a macabre gathering of nuns nearby, whose surreptitious cluster might have made Draco suspect them of organizing a séance, had they not been already dead.

"Oh no," said Hermione, stopping abruptly. "Turn back, turn back, I don't want to talk to Moaning Myrtle-"

"Who?" said Harry, as they backtracked quickly. Draco had to hurry to catch up, though he had been interested to check up on Myrtle. Not that she would remember him.

"She haunts the girls' toilet on the first floor," said Hermione.

"She haunts a toilet?"

"Yes. It's been out of order all year because she keeps having tantrums and flooding the place. I never went in there anyway if I could avoid it, it's awful trying to go to the loo with her wailing at you-"

"Look, food!" said Ron, and Draco had to admit the Halloween feast did have this party beat on one front. It showed a singular lack of hospitality towards living guests, the rancid smell it

put off: large, rotten fish besmirching antique silver platters, maggoty haggis, burnt cakes, furry cheese, and of course a cake for the Deathday boy himself. It was a huge grey monstrosity in the shape of a tombstone, which read *Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, died 31st October, 1492*. Ghosts passed through the cake of honor as unceremoniously as the rest of the food, though, with their mouths open in the strangest fashion.

"Can you taste it if you walk through it?" Potter asked a portly passing ghost.

"Almost," said the ghost sadly, and he drifted away.

"I expect they've let it rot to give it a stronger flavor," said Hermione knowledgeably, pinching her nose and leaning closer to look at the putrid haggis.

"It's like the Tantalus charm, in a way," Draco commented offhandedly, only to roll his eyes at her inquisitive look. "I'll explain it later, Hermione. If we don't move on post-haste, our Weasley representative is liable to hurl on the rotten cabbages."

Peeves came to greet them as soon as they left the table, swooping up and hovering before them in mid-air. Potter greeted him cordially, ever the polite young man, despite the sartorial choices Peeves had made for the occasion of a bright orange party hat and revolving bow-tie that Draco thought would almost have made it the politer thing not to acknowledge him. Especially when Peeves tried to offer them peanuts covered in fungus. Severus could have identified the type of fungus, and Draco thought ruefully that Severus would have enjoyed this party far more than the Halloween feast himself. Maybe next year, when the Gryffindors went back to their normal boring holiday cheer, Draco could wrangle another invitation out of Nick and bring Severus to see this.

"Heard you talking about poor Myrtle," said Peeves, with a look like a twisted version of the Weasley twins about to cause mischief. "Rude you was about poor Myrtle." He took a deep breath and bellowed, "OY! MYRTLE!"

"Oh, no, Peeves, don't tell her what I said, she'll be really upset," Hermione whispered frantically. "I didn't mean it, I don't mind her- er, hello, Myrtle."

Draco felt a mixture of the chill of past misery with bittersweet nostalgia, at the sight of the girl who had been his only confidant for some of the worst months of his life. She also happened to be a squat, glum, unbearable whiner of a ghost.

"What?" Myrtle said sulkily, and Draco leaned back and enjoyed the tableau before him of his two favorite Muggleborns in awkward conversation.

"How are you, Myrtle?" said Hermione, in a falsely bright voice. "It's nice to see you out of the toilet." Oh, the pride of Gryffindor: Hermione Granger's social skills.

Myrtle sniffed.

"Miss Granger was just talking about you-" said Peeves slyly in Myrtle's ear.

"Just saying- saying- how nice you look tonight," said Hermione, glaring at Peeves.

Myrtle eyed Hermione suspiciously. "You're making fun of me," she said, silver tears welling rapidly in her small, see-through eyes.

"No- honestly- didn't I just say how nice Myrtle's looking?" said Hermione, nudging Harry and Ron in the ribs. "Oh, yeah..."

"She did..."

"Don't lie to me," Myrtle gasped, tears now flooding down her face, while Peeves chuckled happily over her shoulder. "D'you think I don't know what people call me behind my back? Fat Myrtle! Ugly Myrtle! Miserable, moaning, moping Myrtle!"

"You've missed out 'spotty'," Peeves hissed in her ear. Moaning Myrtle burst into anguished sobs and fled from the dungeon. Peeves shot after her, pelting her with moldy peanuts, yelling, "Spotty! Spotty!"

"Oh, dear," said Hermione sadly, and Draco's heart turned strangely in his chest, remembering all the times he had cried and Myrtle had listened in her unhelpful way.

"Well, on that bright note, I think it's my time to go," Draco said drolly, "Have fun, you lot," and brushed off the trio quickly enough to follow Myrtle as she fled through the Slytherin labyrinth he knew like the back of his hand. Admittedly, she did have the advantage she could float through walls, but when he cast Lumos maxima, it drew her attention enough to float back through the nearest one to him. Maybe she thought he was another ghost from it- which, in one way of thinking, wasn't entirely false.

"Myrtle," Draco said, "I'm sorry me and my friends upset you."

She squinted suspiciously. "Come to drive the knife in a little more, fancy blond boy?"

Draco felt at his fur, wondering if it made him look a bit too pompous for his own good. "No, just to tell you what she actually said, alright? I'll level with you. She wasn't talking about your looks, Myrtle. She was just complaining about your bathroom being flooded, so she can't use it. That's all. Honestly."

Myrtle brushed off her ghostly tears. "Really?" she asked, in a quivering voice he remembered well, and he held out a hand to her ghostly one.

"Really," Draco said. "We can shake on it. I'm Draco."

"Oh," Myrtle said, squinting at his hand dubiously and shying away. "Funny name. I've heard of you already, pretty blond boy. Aren't you the boy who curses people's tongues?"

Draco started to laugh in sheer disbelief, at even Moaning Myrtle hearing the half-true, half-embellished rumors. "I am, as a matter of fact. I have a policy. If anyone talks about me without the proper respect, I'll curse their tongue with a spell I know, to glue their tongue to the roof of their mouth, so they can't talk about me anymore." Draco rolled his eyes and waggled his hand at her. "Yes, horrid, I know."

"I wish I knew how to do that." Myrtle stared at his hand, and then took it, the eerie chill of her presence sliming against his fingers.

"Don't worry, I don't think it works on ghosts."

That made her giggle in that alarming way of hers. "I don't know. Would you like to try?"

"Um, no thanks, but I appreciate it," Draco said with a weak smile, and looked towards the way out of the labyrinth. "I want to see if there's still any of the feast left, but it was nice to talk to you, okay, Myrtle?"

"Anytime, tongue boy!" she called after him.

When Draco reached the Great Hall, he found it in a strange state of half-emptiness, with some of the students still at their tables though the feast seemed to have formally ended. The bats were fleeing willy-nilly into the Entrance Hall, while most of the students milled up towards the staircases in an unusual sort of clump. Draco pushed his way through, milling between the traffic that seemed to have been held up somewhere, and followed the trail of children to whatever had attracted their attention, and most likely sent some students running back down to their House tables to discuss in those hushed voices.

A nagging feeling cut at the back of his mind, a mental image of his second notebook swimming up for Halloween. He knew what that page had said. There was no forgetting it with or without reminder, but he hadn't bothered checking it, or any of the pages on the blue loop for quite some time now. Because Severus had destroyed the diary. Draco had prevented-

Prevented, he had thought, the words that all the children were staring at now, painted in foot-tall letters that looked like smeared blood:

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.

ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

Potter, Ron, and Hermione stood in front of the words, just like last time. They looked no less stunned. Filch's cat looked no less petrified. The words had even been painted in the same place.

Filch pushed through and began to shriek in horror and then fury over his cat, blaming Potter. "You! You! You've murdered my cat! You've killed her! I'll kill you! I'll-"

"Argus!"

Dumbledore had climbed up the stairs, flanked by a number of professors, including Severus. He was the one to pull Mrs. Norris down off the wall. His arrival made the Gryffindor trio turn, and like it always did, Draco's hair must have caught the light. Potter was the first

whose eyes fell on Draco instead of Dumbledore or anyone else, and didn't move. Dumbledore's gaze was moving too, sweeping over the gathered students as if probing, searching for something, someone-

Draco couldn't have done anything in the world that would have made him look guiltier. But it didn't matter. He still found himself running.

The Stones of Hogwarts

Chapter Notes

Playlist

It was only when Draco made it back to his bed and spelled himself safely inside that he remembered he wasn't actually guilty. Not in the way he had made himself look, the way that people might think on seeing him flee from the scene, if the strain of suspicion against Potter didn't start up as promptly as last time. He was guilty of failure, of having known what would happen- of thinking he had fixed it, and yet seeing those words on the wall unaltered.

And he could not forget how he had once rejoiced at them. The fear coursed through his body like waves of a curse thrown upon him, but only from his own mind- the visions of what was to come, of Hermione petrified or worse. And if he lost her, he deserved it, because the first time when he'd heard in the blue loop, he'd been so pleased. He'd *laughed*, so if he lost her-

If it had been anyone else, even Dumbledore, charged with the destruction of the diary, Draco would have questioned it. But it had been *Severus*. To question Severus was to have nothing in the world to believe in, since Salazar knew, Draco's belief in himself had been petrified as much as that ugly cat. Had he been wrong all along to connect the Chamber to that diary, just because of the chain that took it from the Manor to Ginny Weasley?

He didn't want to hear the others, so he used his wand to muffle any sounds from outside as well. If the professors were sending for him, either because they thought him the culprit or just rightly suspected he knew more than he would tell... well, they would have to do it themselves. He imagined them reversing his locking spell, or blasting their way in by brute force, and welcomed it.

He could sleep very little, with his brain turning to speculate again and again what Potter must have thought, watching Draco run away from him.

He rose later than he should have, without sounds from outside to wake him. It made his entrance to breakfast a grand one, and the Great Hall as one turned their heads to stare, as relatively normal-sounding chatter faded to furtive whispers. They began again quickly enough that he thought himself merely one possibility among many, rather than completely convicted in the court of public opinion, but there were so many eyes on him, trying to figure him out...

He hunched over his plate and began to shovel food into his face at the maximum pace, resolving not to take a single meal more in the Great Hall if this scrutiny endured much longer, and let that make him look guiltier. He could rationalize taking his meals in the

kitchen with the house elves as monitoring for Dobby, though any rational part of him said it had been so long, he should just accept Dobby wasn't coming.

"How did you do it?" Blaise whispered, at the same time as Pansy whispered,

"Why Filch? Why his cat? Is it because of that rumor he's a Squib?"

At the same time, Theo leaned to his ear to whisper, "You *are* the Heir of Slytherin, right?"

"It wasn't me!"

Say one thing about the infamous policy about tongues that spoke ill of Draco Malfoy, it did keep most people from maligning him to his face. But it didn't help if it was people like his fellow Slytherins, who thought their suspicions a compliment. And it did nothing to stop the speculative stares that followed him. He didn't know why he bothered even making brief checks of the library, when he should have known he wouldn't run into the Gryffindors at their table. The fact that everyone knew he sat there meant they knew where to gawk at the potential feline-slayer.

He was just surprised Filch hadn't confronted him about it. From what he heard, Filch kept it fresh in everyone's minds by pacing the spot where she had been attacked, as though he thought the attacker might come back, and scrubbing at the message on the wall with 'Mrs. Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover'. It had no effect on the words, as one furtive trip past them showed Draco: THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED screamed its smug declaration out as the same lash of failure, the same promise of disaster to come. His attempt to change the blue loop had just rendered the red line more difficult if not impossible to predict now. But Draco didn't lay eyes on Filch. Either he didn't suspect Draco as much as others, or he just didn't dare face a second-year.

Draco didn't last long in the library. He spent an hour after classes with the house elves in the kitchen, writing his History of Magic essay with the background chatter of the elves at work a faint comfort. Quidditch practice was more stilted than usual, but the team had never been overly friendly towards him to begin with. He stayed out on the Quidditch pitch after, sitting under the bleachers, first finishing a book on Occlumency, and then aimlessly practicing spells, while he tried and failed to think of a way to explain how this could have happened the same as blue loop, other than the most obvious explanations: Severus was lying about destroying it, Severus had unknowingly failed to destroy it, Draco had been wrong to identify the diary as the fatal one from the case at Malfoy Manor, or the diary was not what was really behind the Chamber, or at least not essential to its opening.

He preferred the latter two to the former. His own incompetence was more plausible than Severus's corruption, and far more so than Severus's incompetence. He imagined Severus as the culprit, prompted by the diary to exact that hunting plan it would assign no matter its owner, and almost had to laugh at the image of Severus with his billowing dark robes bearing down like a shrieking raven on Mrs. Norris. But again, his unshakeable faith in Severus's competence found it hard to believe that Severus would have petrified and not just killed that piece of living taxidermy.

It took a long time flying for him to realize how late it got, and that Ron wasn't coming.

It was all too easy to avoid the Gryffindors how that he wasn't attending meals anymore, though Draco was hardly sure who was avoiding who. He didn't think they could suspect him as the perpetrator, or at least Hermione couldn't. But they might well have gleaned some inkling of his privileged knowledge of the situation, and his failure to let them in on it or put a stop to it.

He'd had too much faith in them. The second he saw them in Potions that Wednesday, he knew.

The note he charmed to go flying to Hermione during the brewing process was intercepted by Severus, who did not read it aloud as he would have for any other student. He just turned to give Draco a look that showed no little repulsion at its contents: *Hermione please meet me after classes today bring the blunderbusses if you must I need to explain!*

Perhaps it was offensive to Severus to see Draco reaching out to Gryffindors about the Chamber before Severus himself. But Severus was harder to fool, and besides, some awful part of Draco had to doubt whether Severus had, willingly or unwillingly, not destroyed the diary after all.

If only he had been brave enough to stay and watch the Liquid Fiendfyre.

Draco went to the Owlery to send a similar message to the Gryffindors for that night at dinner instead. He asked to meet him right after dinner in the trophy room, and hoped they would not take it as any kind of challenge to a duel. If so, he would regret the chance not to enlist his natural second for a duel, Neville Longbottom-

It was no good. He was so nervous as he waited for them, he couldn't even make himself laugh.

The door opened, and the sight of Potter made his heart lighten, only to sink when it was only Potter. "Where are Ron and Hermione?" he blurted, hardly the question best-calculated to gain Potter's favor, but he couldn't help it.

"Hermione has reading to do," Potter said, in a less hostile tone that Draco might have feared. "And Ron's helping. She hasn't stopped researching since Halloween-"

"Funny, I haven't seen her in the library," Draco muttered.

"We haven't seen you there either," Potter said, which, fair point. Somehow he doubted Potter would be sympathetic to the argument that Draco got uncomfortable being stared at, given that Potter got stared at all the time simply for breathing.

"What has she been researching?" Draco asked instead. He could have slapped himself for asking unnecessary questions, like some uninspired Harry Potter impression, when he got the obvious answer,

"The Chamber of Secrets. Which she thinks is real."

"Yeah, probably is. So what did she find?" Draco asked, and Potter shrugged, finally entering the trophy room, only to stalk more of a circle around Draco than head towards him.

"Mostly, what Professor Binns told us," Potter said, roaming around the trophies with a distant air. "An old legend about Salazar Slytherin. He left the school, leaving a Chamber of Secrets behind with a monster inside, which his true heir could open to purge the school of the unworthy. She got him to talk about it in History of Magic, though he said the Chamber isn't real, even though your ancestor would probably have-"

"Wait. What do you mean, *my* ancestor?"

Potter finally stopped pacing, leaning against a large Slytherin House Cup and crossing his arms over his chest. "Draco, everyone in the school heard. Your father was yelling in that Howler about how you'd brought disgrace on the blood of Slytherin-"

"What? People actually-" The amount of suspicion he had been receiving made an awful amount more sense. "It isn't true, Potter. Ask Hermione, she looked at the portraits at the Manor this summer. My father just likes to say that because it gives him more cache with other pureblood families. But it's all made up. All of our circle have tried to claim that sometime or other over the years, but I don't have Slytherin's blood, Potter, I'm not his *heir*-"

"And after dinner, we were going up to meet you," Potter interrupted, arms tightening where they were crossed against his body like a shield against Draco, and Draco realized, *He's afraid of me.* "And we walked past the writing on the wall, and we saw spiders climbing up towards the ceiling. When we followed it, it led to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, so we asked her if she'd seen anything. And she told us she hadn't, because she'd been talking to you. She didn't remember your name exactly, but 'that pretty blond boy in the silver furs'? Like you were trying to distract her, or... Maybe we should have told the teachers about you and that ghost, but we didn't want to do that to you..."

"Potter," Draco said slowly, throat constricting, "You can't really honestly think *I* could-"

"Draco, why were you talking to that ghost girl? And why did you run away that night?"

There was no sane way to answer the first question, and not much of a better one to answer the second. "Potter, I know it looks suspicious, but there's people saying they think it's you too, aren't they?" Potter nodded. "If they knew what the Chamber of Secrets was, they wouldn't suspect either of us, because we wouldn't put Hermione at risk. *I* wouldn't. Listen to me, Potter, I know I've never been half-decent to *you*, but Hermione-"

"Hermione?" Potter frowned. Draco once again feared for the survival of the wizarding world, if its fate lay in the hands of blundering clueless fools like Potter, or worse, Draco himself.

"Did Binns not explain this to you?" Draco asked impatiently. "Because she's Muggleborn, and that's who Slytherin's monster would go after. So if I had any power, I wouldn't be trying to open the Chamber, I'd be doing everything to close it-"

"Draco, you know how this looks, right?" Potter groaned, rubbing at his eyes. Draco took a hesitant step towards him with raised hands, feeling like his body was made of some radioactive substance he had to keep away from Harry Potter. "Really bad. All that with the diary- you say it was destroyed, but by Snape- and you say you couldn't be the Heir of Slytherin, but you were chosen by that wand- We're not saying you're doing it on purpose, but Hermione says that you can be used *by* dark forces, without even knowing it's happening to you- Are you sure there's nothing wrong with that wand-"

"Go ahead and accuse me, Potter," Draco said tiredly. "You've been beating around it all along. Is that why it's just you? Did you tell them to stay behind for their safety? Only the Boy Who Lived is mighty enough to face up against the Death Eater?"

He knew how bad it looked objectively, just like Potter said, how many gaps had been left by his origins in the blue line, gaps he couldn't fill. And Potter was giving him the chance to fill them, and he would have tried. He would have told Potter everything if his tongue had only let him.

"I don't know what to think, Draco. None of us do. Not even Hermione. She keeps trying to come up with explanations for why you went off with the ghost right before it happened... Draco, why were you with Moaning Myrtle that night?"

Draco shrugged defensively. What was he supposed to say? *I felt bad for her*? It would be more believable if he claimed he'd wanted to test the viability of Langlock on ghosts.

"Draco," Harry said helplessly, waiting for an explanation that didn't come. "If you would just tell us things, I'm sure we could understand, but you never do- *no one* in Slytherin fits this half as much! You do know that, don't you? You're just our age, but you're so powerful. It's like... it's like you're not *really* a second-year sometimes. Like you're not who everyone thinks you are... I don't know how to explain it, I probably sound crazy..."

Draco raised his chin and stared Potter in the face, not ready to concede the truth of Potter's words by looking away. Even if the mouth that was saying them made it tempting to run away, or cry or scream or try and press his own lips against it, as if that would prove anything of his innocence or guilt, anything to make Potter understand he was not what Potter thought. Even if maybe what he was was *worse*, Draco was not the Heir of Slytherin.

"*You're* powerful, Potter," Draco countered, staring at Potter's mouth. "You're more powerful than me by far, so if that's the proof of who's tied to this, you're ahead of me on that-"

"Maybe I am, I don't know," Potter said cagily. "I told you, I was almost sorted into Slytherin, wasn't I? You had me in that uniform..."

Draco couldn't follow what dark places Potter's mind was taking him. "Potter," Draco drawled, putting on his best expression of arrogant nonchalance, "Are you trying to tell me *you're* the Heir of Slytherin? I mean, I *have* heard you suspected around the castle, but of course *I* never thought- although it is true, you do have these *lovely* Slytherin-colored eyes-"

And then came touch, at the Slytherin green of his tie. "My eyes are from my *mother*," Potter protested, the confrontation flaring with that mistake to something serious, and Draco finally

had to look away.

"I didn't mean- I just meant- it was just a joke, I didn't think, Potter, I'm sorry," Draco mumbled, and Potter used the tie to force Draco's eyes back to his face.

"We want to think you're innocent!" Potter sounded like he meant it. "We haven't said anything to anyone, not even to Dumbledore about what Myrtle said. And nothing to anyone else about where I saw you in Knockturn Alley with your father, or whose your wand really is- we *want* to believe you had nothing to do with this. *I* want to. It's just hard when you avoid us and never tell us anything and act like it's all a joke! It's like you *want* us to think the worst of you!"

Draco opened his mouth and honestly tried to say, *There are things I can't tell you because there's an enchantment on me*. But his tongue wouldn't work any better at that than it ever had.

"And I'm the last person you would talk to, aren't I? The last person in the whole world." Harry took a deep breath. "Draco, maybe we should take your wand to Dumbledore again to make sure it's not doing anything... that your *father* didn't do anything to you..."

"Potter," Draco said, licking his dry lips, mind working sluggishly, almost as unprepared as his heart. "I'm talking to you now, I'll swear to you on anything you want. I wouldn't do this, I wouldn't open the Chamber even if my father told me to, I wouldn't betray Hermione like that- Potter, I wouldn't betray *you*-"

"What if I was the Heir of Slytherin like you said?" Potter asked slowly. "Would you turn me in, try to stop me, or would you try to help me and keep my secret? Would you *betray* me then?"

Draco didn't know which answer Potter wanted, so he found himself saying the truth. "I wouldn't betray you. I'd protect you, I'll always protect you... As long as Hermione was safe-"

It must have been the wrong answer. Potter's eyes went wide in horror, before he ran out of the trophy room without another word.

Severus had third-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs first thing on Thursday mornings. Draco hardly had to a waste a thought in his decision to skip History of Magic that morning, and head to Severus's chambers. The wards let him in like always. He crossed into the rooms for the first time since he had seen the Liquid Fiendfyre vial, only to find a wall where there had once been a fire. The carved fireplace that had once held charmed green fire and then shielded red was now a blank flat slab of stone straight up and down, differentiated from the wall around it only by a slightly lighter color to the patched mortar. That discrepancy would lessen in time.

Draco rested his hand against the stone with his heart pounding, as much for the thought of Fiendfyre still lingering on the other side as the prospect of Severus somehow catching him. But he couldn't feel any heat other than that of his own skin. So out came the wand that Potter found so damning to cast "Diffindo," and reflect that the practice spent carving turquoises by wandhand was coming to unexpected practical use.

Or it should have, but the spell barely seemed to make a dent in the stone, to the point Draco wondered if there were some kind of enchantments on it. Was there still a kernel of Fiendfyre burning there for Severus to protect, and breaking the wall would unleash it onto the castle, with all of Severus's earthly possessions and godsons the first casualty?

So be it.

"Bombarda!" Draco called, remembering the way Umbridge had stood and called it out as she blasted in the door to the Room of Requirement. Not that it was an auspicious sign to be taking her as a model. "Bombarda!" Again, the stone only seemed to slightly erode, no better results than the Diffindo. She had used Bombarda maxima, he remembered, so he tried that, only for a bit more dust to be dislodged. But ever since Potter had walked away from him, Draco had been operating less on thought and more on pure slowly mounting rage, including but not limited to meditations on the ungratefulness of Gryffindors, which left room for little in his head but Potter.

"Bombarda maxima!" Draco cast, and closed his eyes for the next attempt, remembering attempt after attempt failing at the Mirror of Erised, but by definition there could not be such old magic on this recalcitrant but ultimately vulnerable wall. He just had to loosen his control, the mental restraint he had worked over going on a year and a half now to keep this wand from blowing away anyone in the vicinity each time he tried to cast a simple spell. Stripping it down now was harder than he had thought, when once erecting the guards had been the easier part.

He imagined a set of knots he had to untie to let something slide down off a rope, casting a Bombarda maxima after each one of the set of seven until finally the rope was completely unblocked, and whatever dark mass of shadow had been held back was loosed. The visualization was different, but the sensation of lowering shields was very much like that of his mental shields with Occlumency, stabbing outwards with his mind and his magic as dual knives, until he could visualize instead the great outbreak of spark and shadow that had come from the wand the first time he touched it, and the other time in Ollivander's. He lost track of how many times he cast Bombarda maxima, until the blackish dust was so thick before his eyes that if some of that same shadow had started to drift out of the talon wand, he would never have known.

"Bombarda maxima!" Draco screamed for what proved to be a final time, as the wall over the fireplace burst open, exploding just like the door to the Room of Requirement, and shards of stone and plaster came out flying at him. He tried to raise a shield, but he couldn't soon enough to keep from being hit in the face and knocked back. The taste of blood came to his mouth, head lolling with a dizzy feeling like he was falling from a great height although he could also feel himself still sat dumbly on the dungeon floor, and then he looked up and saw the man who had raised the only successful shield around him.

"I suppose," Severus intoned from above, "I should be pleased to find you trying to explode a wall, and not *writing* upon one."

"Severus," Draco blurted, then hastily amended, "Sir, I can explain..."

With a flick of his wand the shield dissipated, leaving Draco sitting in a pile of rubble, with Severus a dark blur above him. And then for a second time in almost the same spot, like on Draco's first day of Hogwarts, Severus was humming that healing song, kneeling before him and waving his wand over Draco's face, with an Episkey afterwards to snap Draco's healed nose back into place. Tergeo and a few more cleaning charms swept over Draco in quick succession while he sat there stunned. Severus extracted the talon wand from Draco's hand and set it aside, before dragging him to the nearest armchair and setting him there. "Wait," Severus commanded, and Draco was dazed enough he could barely think not to comply.

Soon Severus was back pressing an unstoppered potion vial into his hand. "Drink," he commanded, and the air in that room turned immediately sourer when Draco did not obey. "Wideye potion," Severus snapped, "Which you will require, as you seem to have suffered a concussion. Unless you would prefer to go to Madam Pomfrey."

Draco looked at the vial, which was indeed labeled as such, and drank with an exhausted resignation to fate. The world cleared up after that, though he began to cough in turn, which Severus called a natural side effect of inhaling a prodigious amount of toxic dust. "Toxic?" Draco breathed, and Severus let out a mirthless snort.

"Not such an expert in Fiendfyre as it seemed?" Severus intoned. "Come and see if you are able, Mr. Malfoy. You might as *well* see what you were so desperate to uncover." Draco was coughing as he pulled himself to his feet, enough for Severus to deliver him additional vials of cough potion and blood-replenishing potion. "No arguments." Draco took them before cautiously approaching the fireplace he had unveiled.

It was virtually unrecognizable, all of its smooth carved surfaces gone obsidian-black, in defiance of the shields Severus had said in place. The rune symbol that had been beneath the grate had been burnt away to that obsidian sheen, with the grate gone entirely. That blackness went up to right below the edge of the flue, where a circular line cut off the burning as if the shield had done its work in keeping the conflagration within the fireplace only. But it might have been a close thing. If Severus had tried to fake the effects of some massive magical blaze in this space, he had done so exceptionally well.

"Why did you block it off?" Draco asked. He risked Severus's displeasure by asking just about anything in the position he found himself, but Severus seemed ready to prove his own innocence. It was excruciating, Draco knew from such recent experience, to be falsely suspected of something terrible, especially by someone whose trust you thought you should have already won.

"I was successful in extinguishing the blaze once it seemed to run its course," Severus informed him coolly, "But by its activation, the liquid seems to have infused itself, even through the shields, into the stone. Subsequent experiments proved that the smallest spark would be enough to reignite the Fiendfyre at full strength. I deemed it judicious to close off the affected stone, to prevent any unwary or *unwise* visitors from making any mistakes. But the diary *was* destroyed. I tell you that with full confidence. Although I can see my credibility with you is somewhat... marred."

"Sir, it's not that I didn't trust you," Draco blurted, feeling about as big as the dust at his feet. He let out a few more coughs, with the potions taking their time to be effective, and hoped

that he seemed sufficiently young and pathetic for Severus to forgive. "It was just- I just had to be *sure*-"

"And you were not? My word did not *suffice* for you, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco was just making it worse. "I know you've never done anything to make me distrust you, sir- you're my godfather, and I believe you, I'm sorry-" Draco didn't have to lie. It was becoming deadly clear how wrong he had been. He should have followed his instincts from the start to trust Severus. But after that talk with Potter, his mind had been so clouded- "I just couldn't understand why this is happening with the Chamber of Secrets, when the diary should have-"

"Interesting," Severus said, with enough ice in his voice to freeze Fiendfyre, "That you are so convinced that the Chamber of Secrets is real, and that Miss Weasley's diary is connected to it."

"I heard things," Draco lied, "Nothing definite, but I overheard things from my father- I told you, the case, and him passing it to her- and he let Hermione visit me over the summer!"

Severus's face at least changed then, from detachment to disgruntlement at this seeming non sequitur. "I thought at the time it was for our deal," Draco explained hastily. "We made this deal that I would try out for the Quidditch team like he wanted, and he would let her come, and let me stay in the Muggle world with her family. I thought I'd made progress with him- and he even didn't try to punish me after I used Langlock on him-" There was a blissful moment of thinking Severus might forgive him, after that mention made the corner of his mouth turn up. "I thought he had changed, but he just thought Hermione would be gone soon anyway, didn't he? He's had the Chamber opened to target her, to punish me-"

"Vain boy," Severus sighed, going over to sink into his armchair with a grimace. It was disenchanting, the sight of those long-beloved armchairs without a fireplace to be set in front of, just furniture haphazardly adrift in an expanse of bleak bare stone. "In your mind this is all about you. Such self-absorption. At this rate you will be giving Potter a run for his money-
"

"I *am* his only child," Draco argued, holding his throat and staggering over to take the opposite armchair as if he had an unchanged right to it. "His son and heir. And I *can* use Aunt Bella's wand. That means he thinks I'm powerful. Valuable. I'm not easily discarded. But it wouldn't just be about me. There's been more raids on the Manor, he *hates* the Weasleys, so if he had a way to target Mr. Weasley's daughter, too..." Draco remembered Father seizing control of the school and throwing Dumbledore out. "And he's on the school board. It would suit his purposes to disgrace the headmaster, a bloodless coup, it makes sense in every direction..."

"How much of this is supposition, Mr. Malfoy," Severus asked silkily, "And how much hearsay?" He was watching Draco keenly now, to the point that Draco felt just as on trial as he had last night with Potter. At least with Severus, he deserved his place in the docket.

"Some of both," Draco said shakily, and Severus handed him another cough potion.

"Take this if the cough persists or returns."

"Thank you, sir," Draco said, and Severus looked annoyed at his gratitude.

"Do not take it as a personal favor, Mr. Malfoy. I am, if it failed to cross your mind, the Head of Slytherin House, with a team due to play Gryffindor in less than two days' time. Whose Seeker, as it seems, has taken it upon himself to burn himself alive with Fiendfyre sooner than have to face *Mr. Potter*."

"I'm sorry," Draco said again. He did not know if he had ever done this much apologizing and meaning it in all his years in the blue loop. Nor did it seem to be much help.

"Have you had your distrust satisfied, Mr. Malfoy?" Severus asked in dismissal, and Draco withered before him.

"Please, sir, if you'd allow me... I want to help clean your rooms or repair the damages-"

"That wall," Severus said flatly, "Was erected not just of stone, but powerful potions and enchantments. That you managed nonetheless to break it down is disappointing but not surprising. But do not think so highly of your raw undisciplined power that *I* would require your assistance."

"I didn't mean- I just thought I should, since I was the one to cause-"

"Uncomfortable, Mr. Malfoy?" Severus asked, rising to his feet to necessitate Draco doing the same. "Take it as a lesson for you in your *impressionable* youth. Trust can seem as firm and unchanging as the stones of Hogwarts, but only when there is no enemy knocking at the gates or creeping from within. You should not be surprised how with the slightest pressure, trust can crumble, with much more ease than you broke down this wall." Severus took a handful of the dust, far away from their faces to avoid the toxins, and lifted it before letting it fall through his fingers.

After Draco left, he could only stand to give it an hour before checking. When he did, he found that the wards to the Potions classroom, storeroom, and Severus's chambers had all been closed to him.

Malfoy Invincible

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Hi everyone! Thanks so much for all your thoughts and comments so far! I have followed the suggestion to add the Draco Malfoy Needs a Hug tag, as that seems most definitely needed lol. Yes, the "Eurydice" from the mirror will definitely come into play at some point, though not for a while... it's a mystery ^^ As for frustrations at other characters, believe me, I get it, but keep in mind that we are very much only in Draco's head, and consider how his actions may have looked from an outside perspective, given how erratic and unpredictable they were even to Draco himself. Finally, as for the speed of update, I'm a fast writer, and it also helps that I have a chapter-by-chapter outline for the next couple books that I work off in detail, though obviously sometimes I end up having things go differently than planned... Anyway, much love, and enjoy! <3

"Funny to see you in the library the morning of your debut as Seeker."

Draco was not surprised Hermione was the one to find him there around dawn, searching in the Charms stacks that thundering Saturday morning. "I'm not researching enchantments with the blood of innocents, if that's what you mean." Draco pulled *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 6* down from the shelf and showed her.

He thought he remembered covering the bubble-head charm in sixth-year with Flitwick, but he hadn't exactly been all there back then. It wasn't like he'd been planning to sit his NEWTs either, or expected to live long enough to have the chance regardless. So he didn't remember the incantation, but he'd been determined to have this charm since yesterday afternoon. Thinking back to the night Severus burned the diary had triggered the recollection of Severus putting it on him, when he'd thought Draco meant to stay.

But he could hardly go to Severus to ask. His attempt to query Cedric Diggory about it in the library had been met with only baffled incomprehension. The handsome fifth-year had just hunched with a frown over his book, to keep the dread Heir of Slytherin from spying on him. Somehow, Draco's addled mind yesterday hadn't put two and two together, that Diggory might have learned that charm expressly *for* the Triwizard Tournament.

At least it had given credence to Draco's old claims to fancy the boy, as Blaise had been in earshot, and teased him for days afterwards about being shut down. Being suspected of awful dark magic and spurned by the Gryffindors seemed to have brought his old friends back to a bewildering level of familiarity, like Draco had seen reason and decided to come back to the fold. They all seemed happy the Chamber was open, like they *wanted* him to be the one

guilty. He wondered how many of them he would have to curse before they stopped laboring under their illusions.

"What are you researching?" Hermione asked, and read over his shoulder, frowning at the picture of a circle like a fishbowl around the head of someone underwater. "The Bubble-head Charm... is that for today's match?" He hated how quick on the uptake she was. He'd been able to decide whatever information he wanted Vince and Greg to know, never in danger of them figuring anything out on their own. "To keep the rain away? Draco, that's..."

"Uh-uh," went Draco, snatching the book away from her. It looked to be the only copy on the Charms shelves as well. "All's fair in love and war, Hermione. Can't have you learning it to teach Potter and the Gryffindors."

"But you're going to teach the Slytherins?" she asked indignantly. "What is it you're planning, Draco? For the Slytherins to all have their faces shielded from the weather, while Gryffindor is caught in the rain?"

"If there's some rule in the laws of Quidditch against it," Draco drawled, shoving the book into his bag, "Then we'll have to remove them, and I'll just cast Impervius. People cast that all the time, playing Quidditch in the rain. It's not that different-"

"But you're planning to use this to get an unfair advantage," she hissed, "Something to give Slytherin an edge over Gryffindor." She said that like it was a *bad* thing. "Draco, you can't!"

Draco shrugged. "Offending your delicate moral sensibilities with my nefarious Slytherin ways? Yes, I *must* be the Heir of Slytherin plotting the downfall of all non-purebloods, to have this level of irredeemable evil in my heart."

"Of course I don't think you're the *Heir of Slytherin*," she hissed dismissively. He thought he believed her, from the irritation in her eyes as she brushed past it, and the fact that she had never been a very good liar. "But if you use this charm to help Slytherin and not Gryffindor, I'll still think you're doing something wrong. It's not about who's smarter, it's *Quidditch*. The game is about who's better at flying, not about who's better at magic! What, did Professor Snape suggest this?"

Draco bit back a complaint, because she wasn't completely wrong. Call it a distinction between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. "Forget it. You want Gryffindor to win. And you've been hanging out with Potter and Ron all the time, why should I care what you think?"

"I believe you," Hermione whispered, "*I* know you couldn't be the Heir of Slytherin, but Harry- Harry says he thinks- I don't know, and Ron says he isn't sure, and he and Harry are so close..."

"And you're taking Potter's side too, of course you are," Draco hissed, feeling the threat of tears prickling at the back of his eyes. He looked down at her wrist and saw she had on her bracelet, but it was little consolation. *Turquoises for mental clarity. Mustn't let the end of a friendship get in the way of studying.* "And you think you can still tell me what to do

anyway? Guess what, Hermione, just because I'm not the Heir of Slytherin, it doesn't mean I'm *good.* I'm using the charm," he spat, and stalked out of the library.

His dramatic exit was somewhat undermined by Madam Pince chasing after him insisting he properly check out the book he'd taken, but he did manage to storm out eventually.

He didn't use the charm. He found it relatively easy, and effective at keeping water away when he tried it at the bathroom sink. But he kept the practice out of the eyes of his team, and he didn't end up using it, even later in the game when the rain began to pour.

The match was due to start at 11, by which time Draco's nerves were nearly shot. On an impulse, he took the Draught of Peace that Severus had given him for Christmas last year, and felt his anxiety settle down to a dull buzz instead of a roar. Maybe Hermione would have counted this as cheating too, but he would call it leveling the playing field. None of the other players suffered from the kind of stupid respiratory fits that he did, at least not to his knowledge. Nor had any of them likely been recently struck in the head by exploding stones infused with liquid Fiendfyre.

It wasn't raining at the start of the match, just misty and muggy, which gave Draco the relief of thinking Hermione wouldn't get the chance to see he'd listened to her. If she did, she'd probably think it was some grand moral awakening for him, instead of the same issue she always posed for him: it wasn't worth her nagging to defy her. There were dark clouds in the sky above, though, which portended the kind of storm approaching that he remembered from the first time.

It would have made him wish the match over quickly, should he not have known that Potter was the only one likely to catch the Snitch at that speed. He remembered last year's five minute Gryffindor-Hufflepuff debacle, and all the times Potter had bested him in the air, and told himself he wasn't afraid. After all, he remembered that rogue Bludger without having to look in his notebook, though he had no way to know if it would recur. He'd assumed the first time round it was someone falsely blaming Potter as the Heir of Slytherin. He smiled at that thought, only to grimace as he realized that if it was back, Hermione would suspect Draco as the one to curse it.

When he'd made Seeker, he'd flattered himself thinking Hermione's loyalties would be divided in the Gryffindor-Slytherin match, that she'd be in agony over who to support, despite being a Gryffindor herself. There was no doubt who she'd be supporting now.

Either way, he knew the match likely to go worse than last time, without Slytherin holding the advantage in brooms. Conversely, Gryffindor looked like they were dreading it less than he remembered. But he could hope for the rain and lightning to introduce some element of chaos. And there was his own increased experience to count as an asset at Seeker, however little faith he had that any of it would be of use against Potter. He hadn't even managed to beat first-year Potter at *dueling*, when Potter's lead offensive spell had been *Spongify.* It was hard not to think fatalistically when it came to that walking nightmare of a boy. Draco's place was simply beneath him in *anything*, and the universe knew it and enforced it on them.

"Gryffindor may have a better Seeker," Flint began, which did wonders for Draco's confidence, "But we have a better all-round team, and we've been planning for this match all

year." The huddle made sounds of agreement, which Draco chose to attribute to the remark about planning instead of the one about Seekers.

"They're a bunch of puny little half-breeds and children and *girls*." Draco chose to ignore that last part. "It's going to be a hell of a storm up there, and those weaklings aren't going to be able to take it the way we can. They're going to crumble under the pressure, and we're gonna make sure they do." Nods and shouts of agreement again, although this was hardly as convincing a promise of victory as when Flint had used their superior brooms to tell them they were destined for glory.

"Everyone out there wants us to lose, except for the Slytherins," Flint went on, which Draco felt hit him where Flint's earlier idiotic assertions hadn't. "You heard them all cheer the Gryffindor team when they got on the pitch. Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff too. They're just waiting to see us fail so they can laugh at us and lick the Gryffindors' boots. *Harry Potter's* boots. No one ever wants to see Slytherins succeed but Slytherins." And often not even those fellow Slytherins. "We're the ones who have to stand up for Slytherin on that pitch. We're the ones who have to prove them wrong, because however much they sneer at us, we know we're better than them! We're *stronger* than them! We are the strong ones! Slytherin!"

"*Slytherin*," Draco hissed along with the other boys, pulling his hand back from the mass of hands gathered. Boos and hisses followed them from three sides of the stands, but the cheers from Slytherin were still audible. Against all odds, Pansy and Millie seemed to have erected a banner that read MALFOY INVISIBLE*,* which the knot of second-years was supporting with them. It made Draco very angry at first, until he realized he was misreading it through the murkiness and it actually said MALFOY INVINCIBLE. Theo waved a hand to Draco from the crowd, and with a false swagger, Draco waved back. The Slytherin section all cheered at the motion.

Madam Hooch directed asked Flint and Wood to shake hands, which they did, giving each other threatening stares and gripping rather harder than was necessary. Draco had always wondered how much of that bristling was sexual tension between them.

He gripped his broom tightly, reminding himself this broom was the best on the pitch. He tried not to think about how many years it had actually been since he played a real competitive Quidditch match. It had been the end of fifth year in the blue loop, a loss, so that made it- he cut off the thought, but it didn't even take locking eyes with Potter to make Draco's stomach roll, enough that it was very fortuitous he had taken the Draught of Peace.

"On my whistle," said Madam Hooch, "Three... two... one..."

There was no rogue Bludger. That much became clear when they all shot into the sky, Draco following Potter. The Bludgers all stayed down where they belonged with Vince and Greg- no, with Derrick and Bole. Potter was free to scout about the skies while the game unfolded beneath them, far less advantageously to Slytherin without superior brooms. Draco fell without thinking into the bad habit of watching Potter look for the Snitch instead of looking for it himself.

Meanwhile, Adrian Pucey nearly lost his seat, as one of the Weasley twins nailed him with a very much functional Bludger. Draco tried to focus on his Seeking, though, with a self-

loathing snort towards his fellow Slytherins. *Oh, yes, we're* so *much better and stronger than them.*

"Just going to follow me all game, Malfoy?" Potter called out to him.

Draco pushed the broom to glide beside Potter. "You would know. You're the one who follows me around in real life, Potter, seems only fair for me to do the same in the air." Potter made a stifled noise, then pointedly wrenched his face away from glaring at Draco to looking for the Snitch again.

It was becoming harder for Potter to look, as raindrops began to drop onto Potter's glasses. That made it an even worse strategy for Draco to watch Potter instead of the Snitch. Bit by bit, that became difficult even for Draco with unclouded vision and an Impervius charm, as the game below them became so misty, Lee Jordan's voice was the only thing he and surely Potter could use to monitor the game state. "Gryffindor lead, thirty points to twenty..."

It didn't matter much. Anyone who could do basic math knew there was almost never a bad time to catch the Snitch, when it came to winning a match. That was, unless you were Viktor Krum or that vacuous Girl Weasley.

Draco refused to leave Potter's side, keeping with him by instinct. But if Draco's vision was significantly better than Potter's, all he was doing was giving Potter a leg up on catching up, if Draco spotted the Snitch first. So Draco took a chance and sped off towards the other end of the pitch, near the mist over the Ravenclaw stands- only to slow when even through the rain, he could see the bright blond beam of Luna Lovegood's hair. He broom came to a stop, like he might freeze then and there and fall-

And then he felt the telltale slap of more wind and water whipped against him from the side. Potter was the one following him now. "You see, Potter? What did I tell you? You just can't leave me alone," he taunted, but Potter followed him on the loop around the perimeter he executed. It left Draco trying with great effort to look for any flash of gold, when there was Harry bloody Potter there beside him that he had to look away from, drenched in wet crimson robes with his unruly hair falling into his face from the rain.

Draco's second circle around the stands took them low enough for Peregrine to spot them and aim a Bludger at Potter. Potter dodged, getting Draco in the way of the Bludger so he had to move away too, but it gave Draco an idea. He didn't waste a second in delay before speeding his Nimbus 2001 like his life depended on it straight towards the Slytherin hoops. Potter would be less likely to suspect a feint if it was Draco's own Keeper he was putting at risk.

And Potter bought it, making a twin streak of ruby that soon outpaced him, making it to the hoops with Bletchley hastily moving aside to save his hide, as Draco pulled up and swerved around the hoops just as planned, just as against Terence Higgs-

Potter rocketed through with a bizarrely rapid twist of his broom, to follow Draco up into the clouds, where he had deemed it wise to go, to leave a certain distance between him and Potter. "What the hell!" Potter screamed at him over the sound of thunder. A bolt of lightning flashed to silhouette him from dangerously close behind, the rain clumping his hair enough

that the halo lit up his lightning bolt scar. "Were you trying to kill me? You think that's going to work on me like your stupid Slytherins?"

The Snitch was hovering beside Potter's ear, unseen. Draco couldn't believe Potter hadn't noticed it. Nor did the Snitch move in the confrontation up there in the deluge, as if it too was smitten with Potter, along with the rest of the world. It left Draco caught between trying to get it before Potter noticed, or ignoring it and hoping Potter didn't see until it moved away. He'd have to bet against Potter's reaction time to do the first, which was never a great bet in Quidditch. Though anger seemed to be all that was keeping Potter from realizing. At least Draco's non-response just made him angrier.

"I can't believe I ever-" Potter began, and Draco lost his patience and lunged for the Snitch.

Impossibly, Potter didn't seem to realize before it was too late, Draco's fingers brushing at the golden wing-

And then the Snitch escaped his grasp and flew downward.

He began his dive a split second after Potter did, but by the time he could draw level with Potter even on his Nimbus 2001, they were out of the clouds and hurtling down right towards the middle of the pitch, a path clearing as both sets of enemy Chasers and Beaters pulled out of the way to let the Seekers plummet. Maybe the Gryffindors feared it another feint, but Potter was focused on the Snitch, not an ounce of his body remembering it could have any other purpose than catching his prey.

A Bludger came hurtling from above, clumsily hit by Peregrine with a yowl. Potter dodged it cleanly, while despite Peregrine's shout, Draco saw it coming too late. He tried frantically to get out of its way, with it honing in so close to the ground-

Draco's wet gloves lost hold of his broom and he fell the remaining ten feet. When his body hit the grass, a pain surged instantly in his ankle so badly he screamed. He tried to clutch it, but found himself so dazed he couldn't move enough. He tried to look up into the rain for Potter, but he wasn't there anymore. Potter had landed to the ecstatic screams of three-fourths of Hogwarts, on the ground, on his feet, with the golden Snitch held up shining from his red-gloved hand.

The world went hazier for Draco then. The rain was heavier, with the ground sodden beneath like its spreading mud meant to swallow. Draco could only have welcomed being swallowed up at this juncture. But he was driven back to reality, by a sight worse than Death himself looming at the door: Gilderoy Lockhart, leaning over him with his wand out.

"Cast any spell on me," Draco groaned, "And I won't... leave you a tongue to cast with..."

"Doesn't know what he's saying," Lockhart said to Potter, a bright pillar of darkened red beside him, along with indistinct figures hovering behind. "Not to worry, Malfoy. I'm about to fix your ankle."

"Lockhart, if you dare-" Draco tried to sit up and failed, reaching in his pocket for his wand, but of course it wasn't there. He had been sure to leave it behind in his Quidditch locker, to

remove the temptation to cast the spell that Hermione had forbidden.

And then there was the awful sound of a camera clicking. That blasted Muggleborn first-year who worshiped Potter seemed desperate to capture his hero's victorious moment. Which of course included the felled Slytherin at the Chosen One's feet.

"If you take one more photo of me like this-" Draco tried to threaten the boy, whose name wouldn't come to him, but Lockhart pressed his head back into the mud.

"Lie back, Malfoy," Lockhart said in the least comforting cooing imaginable. "It's a simple charm I've used countless times."

"Potter," Draco hissed, "Stop him, he doesn't know what he's doing-"

But Potter was speaking with a frown to a blob on his left side, whose distinctly red hair even wet seemed to mark it unmistakably as a Weasley.

It was a mark of great mental power on Draco's part that he managed not to yell out *Severus.* "Professor Snape? Professor Snape! Please help me!"

"Stand back," said Lockhart, who was rolling up his jade-green sleeves.

"Professor Snape!" Draco called in desperation, but it was too late. Lockhart cast some wordless spell at Draco's ankle, which sent a slackening feeling up his leg utterly unlike the feeling of healing. If Draco had felt like he was going to be swallowed limply by the mud, that was nothing to the way his body felt like it sagged in on itself as the weakness spread. He wondered if it was some kind of tranquilizing charm to anaesthetize him before the real spell-

But when he looked up, Lockhart had already put his wand away, with the only person at work now the Muggleborn taking pictures. "Ah," said Lockhart. "Yes. Well, that can sometimes happen. But the point is, the bones are no longer broken. That's the thing to bear in mind. So, if someone would just help Mr. Malfoy to toddle up to the Hospital Wing, Madam Pomfrey will be able to- er- tidy him up a bit."

The red blob stepped forward, but a defiant voice snapped, "We'll take him, Potter."

Draco knew the voice even before the darker-skinned green blur came into more focus before him. "Blaise," he whimpered. He tried to drag his weightless, floppy-seeming body up by his elbows and got nowhere. But then he felt the once familiar feeling of Vince and Greg at either side of him, pulling him up, and Theo touching his face, asking him if he could hear him.

Above, he could see more green in the wet smudges around him, a larger one that could have been Millie, with the bright electric green of the sign she had held, still spelling out MALFOY INVINCIBLE. Draco squinted at it with bitter irony, as Potter and Blaise started to argue about who should take Draco to the hospital wing. Why wasn't Potter off celebrating his victory? In his shoes, Draco would have been.

Merlin, hadn't Potter been the one to get a broken bone and have all his bones dissolved by Lockhart last time around? Yet somehow that fate seemed to have befallen Draco instead, and Potter had still gotten the Snitch. "Let him be, Potter," Draco slurred, "No one wants to take care of Slytherins but Slytherins."

Potter stepped aside, and let Vince and Greg do a job better than any he could have anyway.

Having to spend the night in the hospital regrowing his bones gave him a masochistic satisfaction in a way, the most tangible reminder possible that he had no idea what he was doing. Or, simply, that he was spineless.

Once Madam Pomfrey shooed all the Slytherins out, yelling that this boy had thirty-three bones to grow and needed rest, it was disenchanting that Severus didn't stop in to check on him that night, which he'd stupidly hoped for. Nor did the Gryffindors, but he hadn't had hope for that. At least having Theo help him into his pajamas proved an enjoyable experience, although one that would have been more pleasurable had Draco's limbs not all had the consistency of rubber gloves.

"You're in for a rough night," Madam Pomfrey had told him, pouring out a steaming beakerful and handing it to him. "Regrowing bones is a nasty business."

Draco enjoyed the burn of the potion in his throat, something like whisky, which he hadn't tasted in too long. He just wished he had more of some real alcoholic beverage to dull the pain and send him to sleep. Regrowing bones proved a nasty business indeed.

But he couldn't sleep, and how he regretted taking the Draught of Peace before now.

No doubt Potter had taken this punishment better. It did feel like a punishment, for all of his fumbling about with the diary that added up to nothing changed. Or for trying that feint against Potter, though that was within Quidditch rules as far as he knew...

Draco had always told himself that after the Cruciatus curse, after Dementors, after a childhood in the cellars with Father, mundane pain could not affect him. It was child's play in comparison and he was too strong to feel it very much anymore.

That was a complete lie.

Maybe Pomfrey had given him something to make it hurt worse, growing back the bones for this infamous Slytherin, or maybe there was something in the come-down from the Draught of Peace, or the aftermath of the explosion he had caused in Severus's chambers, or else some combination. But mentally listing options in his head had none of its usual comforting effect. He could make himself feel no more in control when his very *bones* were gone- *no backbone, Draco, my son should have more spine*- and a night of pure agony awaited to regain them.

Maybe I died when I cursed that mirror, Draco thought, *And this is purgatory.* He would have cast a Muffliato around the bed so no one would overhear him screaming, but his wand was in his locker- fortuitous, given the curses he might have tried to direct at himself to make this merciless crawling torture inside him stop. He had cast Cruciatus before, though- tried to cast

it once on *Potter*- so if anyone deserved torture, it was him. He had tried to do worse than this to Potter, so-

"Draco Malfoy will not be left to hurting like this!"

And then the bones started growing faster, the slithering sensation under his skin going more rapid and solid like a tree's branches growing at infinitely enhanced speed. Draco's vision went white after only a few moments of that unreal tree-feeling, and the world folded in on itself from incandescent pain. But when he woke some time later, all of his bones were there again.

The Gryffindor Elf

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco woke to the sound of slamming. A head was banging against the metal table beside his bed, and making his own head start to throb sympathetically with it. "What is it?" Draco groaned, rubbing at his eyes, "What's that noise?" and looked down at his hands to find them his usual pale childish ones, all bones included. "Hello?" And then he looked down and saw the wrinkled skin of a house elf's head. "Hey, hey, whatever you're punishing yourself for, could you maybe do it somewhere the sick children aren't recuperating?"

The great glass marble eyes looked up and met his, with what looked like tears ready to fall from those orbs. "Draco Malfoy is hurt worse than before, and it is Dobby's fault!"

"*Dobby*?" Draco cried out, covering his mouth when he heard how loud his childish voice had shrieked and broken. He half-slid, half-fell out of bed to slump on the floor beside Dobby. There it was, a face now unmistakable as any human one, though Draco had used to genuinely think all house elves looked exactly the same. "Dobby," Draco breathed, and fought the urge to wrap his arms around him. "Dobby, stop punishing yourself!"

"Dobby is a bad elf," Dobby said fiercely, slamming his head once more. "Dobby tried to help and made it worse, Draco Malfoy was screaming and crying and Dobby could not stop it-"

"Dobby, what are you talking about, stop it!" Draco managed to edge himself between Dobby and the metal end of the nightstand table to block him. "It doesn't hurt anymore! It was supposed to take all night, but..." He looked at the Hospital Wing clock and smiled. "It's only just past midnight, Dobby, and it doesn't hurt at all. I'm just kind of sleepy. Did I pass out?"

"Draco Malfoy was suffering so much," Dobby said anxiously, "And Dobby could not watch Draco Malfoy suffer like he did with Lucius Malfoy again."

Humiliatingly, Draco felt tears come to his eyes. "How? House elves don't have healing magic, do you?" Draco remembered some faceless house elf, back when he had only been four or five, tearfully pleading his inability to help when Draco fell and skinned his knee, although Draco's infantile fury had certainly made the elf go off and punish himself for it.

"No," Dobby said sadly, "Or Dobby would be more help, but Draco Malfoy had to wait so long for the potion to work. So Dobby was using Dobby's magic to speed it-" The thought that house elves could do something like that would have been terrifying from a different one. "But it put Draco Malfoy into such great agony, Dobby did not know what to do..."

"It was all the pain at once, I think," Draco sighed, "But I'm glad I got it over with. I couldn't have lasted much longer, I'm glad I passed out from it- thank you, Dobby, you saved me again, so you don't have to punish yourself..."

"Dobby was thinking Draco Malfoy would be angry at Dobby," Dobby said timidly, seeming to give up on his head-banging attempts, "Because Dobby was not coming to Hogwarts like Draco Malfoy wanted." Draco shook his head. If it had been *Voldemort* to take him out of that bone-healing nightmare, he was pretty sure he would have lost any anger towards the man.

"And Dobby tried, but the house elves at Hogwarts said there is too many elves here already and no room for Dobby, and that the headmaster said Dobby must search elsewhere for work before Hogwarts can take Dobby. And Dobby was looking for a new home that will pay Dobby, because Dobby is a free elf now..." Dobby's ears seemed to perk up, the pride audible in his voice, before his eyes went sad again. "And Dobby was going all over Britain and even America, but Dobby did not find any wizard who will pay Dobby." Draco could have told him and Hogwarts that. "Dobby was not wanting to worry Draco Malfoy. And Dobby was thinking Draco Malfoy was doing fine and was safe at Hogwarts, but then Dobby heard that there is the Chamber of Secrets opened there, so Dobby must come and protect Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter!"

At the end of this long speech, Draco could feel tears slipping down his face, though he wasn't sure how much were just the aftershock of the lightning strike of pain it had taken to end the re-growth. He had just been so drained, to the point of being completely empty, but finally, something was actually going right. "Are you working at Hogwarts now, Dobby?"

Dobby looked sadder. "No, Draco Malfoy, Dobby was asking again and they said no, and Dobby should not have stayed, but Dobby is watching over Draco Malfoy. If Draco Malfoy could know what it meant, that Draco Malfoy is a pureblood wizard but took a beating on himself to protect Dobby! He is just like Harry Potter! Dobby remembers how it was when He Who Must Not Be Named was at the height of his powers! We elves were treated like vermin! But after Harry Potter triumphed over He Who Must Not Be Named, the Dark Lord's power was broken, and it was a new dawn, and Harry Potter shone like a beacon of hope for those of us who thought the dark days would never end, and now you *and* he have come to Hogwarts together, and you are Dobby's hope... And at Hogwarts, terrible things are happening already, and Dobby does not want Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter to stay here where it is so dangerous and where Dobby *cannot* stay..."

"Why wouldn't they take you at Hogwarts?" Draco interrupted, wiping his face and leaning against the table to sit up, though it would have provided better support without the indentation of Dobby's head in it. "Did they speak to the headmaster? Is there still no room in the kitchens?"

Dobby fidgeted with the buttons on the shirt he wore, long enough on him to almost cover his feet: the shirt Father had thrown to free him, Draco's white button-down sullied after Father's beating, and now shone a gleaming clean white all over.

"The headmaster said Dobby cannot stay because Dobby knows Draco Malfoy."

The next moment, footsteps sounded in the Hospital Wing, and Dobby pushed a finger to his own mouth, before turning to present it like a warning to Draco. Draco put a finger to his own mouth in acknowledgment, before peering his head around the bed and table to look towards the front of the wing. Dumbledore was backing into the dormitory, wearing a long woolly dressing gown and a nightcap. He was carrying one end of what looked like a statue, but which Draco recognized all too well. McGonagall appeared a second later, carrying the feet. Together, they heaved the boy onto a bed, before Dumbledore whispered something to McGonagall and she went off, coming back with Madam Pomfrey, who was pulling a cardigan on over her nightdress. Her hands seemed to falter as she saw the statue of a boy that awaited her, a gasp coming out of her normally unflappable face that sounded eerie in the night.

"What happened?" Madam Pomfrey whispered to Dumbledore, bending over the boy on the bed whose name Draco still couldn't remember for the life of him.

"Another attack," said Dumbledore. "A student found him just outside the steps to the Owlery. By all appearances, he was sending a late night letter to his parents, describing the Quidditch game. Perhaps he stopped to take a photograph of the tower for them as well." He showed Madam Pomfrey an unsent letter, and she exhaled hard.

Draco looked over at the petrified boy in the moonlight, and the name still wouldn't come to him. Something with a C, maybe, or an F, some preposterous name... but it was the boy he remembered as the first, who he had snapped at on the pitch today, with his camera still lodged in his outstretched frozen hands.

"Petrified?" whispered Madam Pomfrey.

"Yes," said Professor McGonagall. "But if Katie Bell hadn't been going to write her parents about the game as well... and if Albus hadn't been on the way downstairs for hot chocolate, who knows what might have..."

McGonagall thought the boy might have gotten a picture of his attacker, which would have been lovely to clear Draco from suspicion. But he seemed to have been no more successful than the first time, as steam and the smell of burnt plastic filled the air, and Dumbledore solemnly intoned, "It means that the Chamber of Secrets is indeed open again."

Yeah, you think?

Draco could have almost started laughing at how little his efforts with the diary had changed anything, if Dobby hadn't been there with a finger still to his lips. McGonagall asked, "But Albus... surely... who?"

"The question is not who," Draco heard Dumbledore say, "The question is, how..."

And then Dumbledore's gaze seemed to fall on Draco's empty bed.

"Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said mildly. "Would you care to join us?"

When Draco stepped reluctantly out from behind the bed, both women looked stunned at the sight of him standing in his pajamas, bones fully regenerated. "That potion should have taken..." Madam Pomfrey began.

And the most Gryffindor house elf in history had to have his say. "Draco Malfoy was not doing anything wrong!" Dobby protested. "Dobby helped him heal faster! Dobby woke him and told him to be silent when Headmaster Dumbledore was coming!" When Dobby's gaze traveled up towards the prone form of the petrified Muggleborn, Draco watched his face go somewhat less confident, but no less resolute against the three professors if they meant to harm or criticize Draco.

Again, the two women looked more astonished than Dumbledore. "Dobby," Dumbledore said mildly. "What a pleasant surprise to meet again so soon."

"Is this young Malfoy's house elf from their manor?" McGonagall asked, sounding appalled to see him there, as if Draco had been living at this school to date with a personal servant.

"In a manner of speaking," Dumbledore said calmly. "Dobby once served at Malfoy Manor, but he was freed, as his clothing shows. He has been seeking paid employment at Hogwarts since. Poppy, Minerva, I believe there is no more we can do for young Mr. Creevey tonight." Colin Creevey, that was it. "If you will allow me, I will speak to Mr. Malfoy and his persistent friend."

The thought of McGonagall leaving made Draco's blood go cold. He had some wary respect for McGonagall, especially after she had made that time travel diagram for him in first year. And Dumbledore's presence never ceased to put part of his mind back at the Astronomy Tower that one awful night. The more attention Dumbledore turned on Draco, the worse it got.

McGonagall was eyeing Draco as if he had done something unspeakably bizarre. "You do not dispute the headmaster calling this house elf your friend?"

Draco shrugged, though he knew he might be implicating Dobby in awful things by being honest. "Why not? It's not like I have any other friends left."

Dumbledore's mouth creased. "Severus *has* spoken of your penchant for the dramatic. Goodnight." McGonagall and Pomfrey left the three of them alone there in the Hospital Wing with the petrified body. Draco glanced down at Dobby, only to see the elf looked massively moved by Draco implicitly calling him his friend. But Dobby seemed to compose himself and hold back any sign of hysterics once Dumbledore's gaze had fallen squarely upon them.

"Do you think I'm the Heir of Slytherin?" Draco demanded.

Marcus Flint always liked to say the best defense was a good attack. By which he meant a strong attack of Bludgers towards the groin, but it went through Draco's head anyway.

"Pardon?" Dumbledore asked, and peered at Draco through his spectacles looking like the most harmless, batty old man in the world. "I commend you on your rapid recovery of spirits, after so crushing an accident."

Draco tried to keep the loathing out of his eyes, but damn it all, if there was anyone who should have been able to figure out Draco wasn't what Potter thought, it should have been Dumbledore, who'd been talking like he already knew who had opened the Chamber of Secrets. *Not a question of who but of how.* Unless that *who* they both knew was Draco in their minds, thanks to the stunt Draco had pulled with the diary along with so many others.

"I know I've got a reputation at Hogwarts," Draco said finally, and heard Ron in his head saying, *That's the trouble with cursing people. It makes people think you might, you know, curse people.* "I know people think I'm some kind of precocious dark wizard hitman, because that's what I've tried to *get* people to think, so they'll leave me alone. So I shouldn't be surprised to be suspected now. But Dobby is just tainted by association? He doesn't follow my orders or anyone else's, not anymore. If he helps me it's because it's his choice, he's free, and he really doesn't have *anywhere* else to go-"

"What strange sights life can place before us sometimes," Dumbledore mused, seeming off in a different world. "The last living lawful heir of the ancient houses of Malfoy *and* Black... pleading for the rights of a free house elf. It *is* a wonderful thing, how after so many years on this planet, we can still be so very surprised."

"It's not a trick," Draco muttered, and looked down at Dobby, whose head had been snapping between Dumbledore and Draco watching them like a sports game. "It's just not *fair*-"

"Draco," Dumbledore said gently, "I did not deny Dobby a place here because you are some kind of dangerous person, but because you seem unhappy. Very unhappy." Any words dried up in Draco's throat. "I have observed, and your Head of House would concur, that you have had difficulties with the other children at Hogwarts. You spend far too many meals hidden away amongst the house elves, sticking to their company in the kitchen instead. Withdrawing yourself so often from the rest of your year is not healthy, Draco. And the introduction of yet another house elf, this one familiar to you besides, to give a further excuse to spend your time in the company of elves instead of human children... that could not be to your benefit. I feel for Dobby, but I must look after the welfare of students as well, and having him here would not be good for you-"

"So what if I prefer house elves to humans?" Draco blurted, hands clenching to fists at his sides. "Humans are *awful*. I should know. I'm a human and *I'm* awful-"

"Draco Malfoy is *not* awful!" Dobby interrupted, marble eyes blazing. "Dobby will not hear Draco Malfoy spoken ill of, even by himself!"

Draco put his head in his hands, feeling like the worst idiot in the world for blowing up at Dumbledore, when he had been so off-base in his suspicions. "I understand why you wouldn't want to hire him, then, Headmaster, but I-" Draco bit his lip. It was more of a sacrifice than he might have expected to grudgingly force out, "I'll start eating all my meals in the Great Hall again. And I'll make more of an effort with the other second-years, I promise- I don't know where else Dobby *could* go, and it's my fault he was freed." Merlin, did he hope Dumbledore wouldn't ask for that story.

"Very well, Draco," Dumbledore said after a pause. "With those caveats- and be sure your Head of House will hold you to them- Dobby may take up paid employment at Hogwarts."

Draco's grin wouldn't leave his face until he fell asleep, even with the petrified face of the other boy staring right at him.

That smile didn't last long once he was back amongst the children of Hogwarts, who talked of nothing but the attack on this person apparently called Creevey. Given how Draco had been seen snapping at Creevey, while he took pictures over his injured body, the pitch of suspicion against Draco seemed to have increased. Nor did it help that Draco had not been in his second-year dorm, but alone in the hospital wing, since it wasn't like Draco could have Dobby march out to tell them he'd been in attendance. It was bad timing for him to have to reappear at meals, but at least that gave him the appearance of less to hide.

Though you wouldn't know it by the way Potter stared, meal after meal, day after day, like he expected at any moment, Draco would start summoning monsters and petrifying the Hufflepuffs.

The weeks that followed would have been very lonely if Dobby hadn't arrived at Hogwarts when he had. Draco's old self in the blue loop would have been horrified to see him spending nights in a cold corridor, in the Slytherin labyrinth charmed bright and warm, trying to teach a house elf to play wizard's chess. But efforts to be friendlier with his Slytherin yearmates were accomplished on little more than a surface level. He was sure to be seen with them in public, especially at meals, but nothing else came of it. Dobby always seemed happy to see him, not missing their match every weeknight, while Draco went flying on weekends, but his presence only seemed to put a damper on other Slytherin second-years. The brief spirit of cohesion animating them when they carried Draco from the Quidditch pitch had gone up in smoke, leaving even Pansy cold as ice to him behind closed doors, all for one distinct reason: *He wouldn't admit to them that he was the Heir of Slytherin.*

Oh, he was reaping what he sowed, with all those jokes about family trolls and practicing blood magic behind the curtains of his bed. He was reaping it in spades, as the years around him treated him with only a slightly different sort of awed respect than before, and his Quidditch teammates tempered their blame for the Gryffindor loss with just augmented distantness- but Draco's yearmates he'd grown up playing with took lack of disclosure as a personal slight. He'd disappointed them immeasurably, when they had been ready to welcome him back into the fold. All the Mudblood-coddling could have been forgiven, with Draco never seen with Gryffindors anymore, and the sight of him making half the other houses' students cross to the other side of a corridor. Blaise couldn't get enough of it when it happened with them walking together. "That's right," he would call out jovially, "All part for the Heir of Slytherin," which really, *really* wasn't helping. When Draco pulled him aside after the fifth or sixth time and told him to stop, Blaise just looked confused.

"If you didn't want people to know the Heir of Slytherin had returned," Blaise asked slowly, "Why did you write it up on that wall?"

"Blaise, how many times do I have to tell you, I'm not the Heir of Slytherin!"

"Well, if that's how you're going to play it," Blaise said sulkily, slinking away, and was civil but short with Draco after that. Nor did he make an effort to walk with Draco to classes

anymore.

Pansy made him a present in the first week after Creevey's petrification, an impressive silver snake pin with emerald-green eyes, which she claimed to have transfigured instead of bought. "What is this," Draco asked, turning it over in his hand, "Some kind of protective talisman?" The trade for amulets and such had gone hilariously through the roof at Hogwarts. "You transfigured this yourself?" It was a welcome surprise, that they might have a rare skill in common. It looked like she could teach him some things about carving silver, if she could only just leave off on all the-

"It's a cloak pin," Pansy said, "For you to wear to show all the peasants that *you* are the Heir of Slytherin, and they need to show the proper respect." She mistook him nearly choking on his pumpkin juice as being insulted. "Oh, I'm sorry, Draco, I know the Heir properly deserves a crown, but they wouldn't let you wear a *crown* to class, so..."

"Pansy," Draco hissed, "I'm not the Heir of Slytherin. I can't wear this if that's what this is for. I don't want people to keep thinking it's me!"

"Fine," Pansy hissed. "Just keep it. Do whatever you want with it. Sell it. I don't care!"

Pansy spent the next few weeks pointedly ignoring him and flirting with third-years when he was nearby, as if no one had ever told her he was gay.

Vince and Greg started attempting to give him some of their food during meals, which Draco at first took as some bizarre but sweet sign they'd missed him. Food was such a valuable currency with them, it seemed a way of showing affection. It was kind, if misguided given how many times a distracted Draco failed to finish his own plate. But after Draco had refused them one too many times, Greg leaned forward worriedly one dinner and whispered, "But won't the monster be getting hungry, Draco?"

For a few seconds, Draco's grasp of reality just stopped functioning. "Greg," Draco said slowly, "What did you just say?"

"You should take our extra food, Draco," Vince said eagerly, "We want to help," and pushed a roll at Draco. "You shouldn't have to take the burden of saving food for it all on your own."

"Vince," Draco breathed, "Greg, have you been slipped any strange potions recently?"

Vince and Greg leaned in conspiratorially, the picture of the adoring, obedient sycophants they had always been for him, a life ago. "Don't act like we're crazy, Draco," Vince said with a grin. "Don't worry, we're on your side."

"We could help you feed the monster," Greg added.

"It would be so cool if you let us meet the monster," Vince whined. "I mean, if it's safe..."

"*Please* let us meet the monster," Greg whined, and Draco slammed a fist on the table.

"I'm not the Heir of Slytherin!" he growled, resisting the temptation to throw Vince's roll back at him. "So you might as well eat." And Vince and Greg did, with an air so wounded, it

could only have been worn by two boys who had spent the first decade of their lives sucking up to Draco, only to somehow still be cruelly denied the right to visit his ancient student-petrifying monster.

Millie had always been the most sensible of their lot, so Draco had been annoyed to see her trying to keep her beloved cat Mr. Wilberforth out of his general radius. Eventually, he managed to pull her aside on the way to dinner, two weeks after Creevey was petrified, and get in her ear, "Millicent, I'm not trying to kill your cat, alright? I'm not the Heir of Slytherin!" Millie just looked at him, saying nothing, and was neither more or less friendly towards him than she had been before. But nor did she stop stepping in front of Mr. Wilberforth, or hurriedly shooing him along, whenever she caught a glimpse of Draco's bright blond hair in the vicinity.

And then there was Theo, Theo who Draco had always flattered himself had a soft spot for him. Even in the red line, though Draco was a different enough person that was hardly objectively likely. It would have been preferable if Draco could somehow transfer his affections, and complete one of this year's top goals of lessening his obsession with Potter, by getting himself sweet on Theo. He'd used to think he was, in the summer after Father went to Azkaban. But just the thought of Potter made anyone around him seem dull, let alone calm, studious, unobtrusive Theo, who was always actively trying to blend into the background. Draco didn't fancy Theo anymore, try as he might to talk himself into it, but that didn't make it sting any less, that even Theo didn't believe he wasn't the Heir of Slytherin.

"Theo," Draco asked in desperation one heinously boring day at the library, coming up to the second-year table and pulling Theo into the Potions stacks, "Theo, I'm getting nowhere in my research on the Chamber of Secrets, and you've always been better at studying." That was debatably untrue in the red line, but Draco didn't give him time to dwell on it. "Do you think you could help me try to learn about it, or at least point me in the right direction?" The Hogwarts library was short on useful titles, which he suspected was because Hermione's research had co-opted them first.

Theo blinked at him in incomprehension, big blue eyes adorably uncertain. "Why would you need to research the Chamber of Secrets when you're the Heir of Slytherin?"

"Theo, for Salazar's sake," Draco groaned, only to hear a startled noise from the corner of the stacks, which Draco was too on edge all the time these days to let go. He gave it an even chance of being Potter, who always seemed to be hovering in his vicinity these days, and unfortunately, it was. Draco flushed violently at how incriminating this must all seem to Potter, depending on what he'd heard: Draco stood close and whispering to a fellow Slytherin in the library, with the other Slytherin insisting Draco *was* the Heir...

"Come to pick up some books for Granger, Potter?" Draco snarled. "If you're looking for something on the Chamber of Secrets, don't bother. I've already checked this whole section twice, not that she hasn't hoarded everything not in the Restricted Section already."

Potter mumbled something incomprehensible and left, with Theo turning to Draco looking apologetic. "Sorry, Draco, but I don't think he heard-"

"*Piss off,* Theo!" Draco snarled, shoving him backwards against the Transfiguration stacks. Several books on becoming an Animagus fell out over him. Draco kicked at one in mindless spite before stalking away. Needless to say, Theo was intelligent enough to keep his distance too after that.

The one thing Draco did get out of that unpleasant little interlude was a visit from Hermione, who cornered him after Potions the next day with a hiss of, "Why did you tell Harry I'm hoarding all the books on the Chamber of Secrets?"

Draco gave her a few long, exaggerated blinks. "Oh, I don't know, Hermione. Maybe it's because... *you're hoarding all the books on the Chamber of Secrets*?"

"Do you know," Hermione said fondly, "I used to think you acted so *mature* for your age?"

"Sorry if it's frustrating not to have anything to work off of," Draco sighed, trying to keep his voice from coming out too whiny. "To clear my name, because I am, you know, *not* the Heir, not that anyone believes it-"

"I believe it, Frankenstein," Hermione said, with a steadiness of gaze that made him uncomfortable, and then held up her bracelet. "I've started wondering which goddess you'll carve me for Christmas..."

"And what do I get, another Arsenal hoodie?" Draco spat. "Except no, your father withdrew that invitation after he saw what *my* father was like, didn't he?"

Hermione's cheeks took on two twin spots of red. "What? No, Draco, that's not- if you must know, the tickets for the first home game proved too expensive for my family to afford-"

"I told him I'd pay for myself," Draco muttered. "For you all too if you liked. It's not like I don't have more than enough money-"

"You mean your father does."

"And that doesn't count, does it?"

"I'm sorry if you were looking forward to going to a match that much," she said, looking at him strangely. "You never *said*, Draco. You made it sound like an afterthought. And just because we didn't relish the idea of taking your father's money doesn't mean we think any differently of you-"

"Says the girl who's barely spent time with me for a month," Draco laughed harshly, only to roll his eyes and flick at the St. Brigid's cross on her wrist. "Oh, I know, it's the blunderbusses. They don't want you around me, do they? Think I'll petrify you the first chance I get? Should you be risking even this much contact with the dreaded summoner of monsters?"

"I'm not hoarding the books. There just isn't much on it, I checked. And I'm working on other research right now anyway. Soon, if we make the breakthrough I think we will, I *will* be able to clear your name to Ron and Harry, and then things can be like they were, I promise. That's

why I'm spending so much time with Ron and Harry. So I can convince them you're innocent! I have this project, I can't tell you yet, it's why I've been so busy, but it's for *you...*"

She reached out and touched the tips of her fingertips to his, face contracting with a nostalgic ruefulness. "I miss you, Frankenstein. I really do. I wish things were different. And I'm trying to fix them. I have a plan, so please, just wait."

The Dueling Club

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Waiting was easier said than done, and not just with Hermione. "How long are you going to stay angry at me?" became Draco's customary whining demand to Severus when they were alone, and Severus had his own rote answers in response, with the wards remaining closed.

"This is not *anger*, Draco," Severus would tell him. "Do you think the Potions master of a school under attack by unknown dark forces does *not* have more important things to occupy his time, than humoring the overblown ego of a twelve-year-old?" Or he would say, "Having children underfoot has never been my preference." Or, "I am enjoying my increased free time far too much to give it up."

Draco told himself Severus didn't mean it, or at least wouldn't after he'd had more time to cool off. But that distance still had him pouting like every bit of the child he looked, when Severus handed him the sign-up list for Christmas and gave him a warning. "Do not expect my rooms to be open for you to come around loitering and whining as you please," he said in a low voice, "Just because it is the holidays. If you expect any coddling, Draco, you would be better served going home for Christmas to your parents."

Given his parents seemed the one set of people not actively hating him at this point, it could have been a tempting thought, but Draco shook his head. "I want to spend Christmas with *you,* Severus," he whined, and drew out the *you* so long he earned himself an infinitely burdened sigh from Severus before he was allowed to write down his name.

He had to defy Severus, which never endeared him to the man, when Severus called him to his rooms late one night and advised him to avoid Lockhart's new Dueling Club. "If you truly wish not to draw attention to yourself."

Draco might have agreed, if not for the very first item on his list of goals for the year: *Unveil Potter as Parselmouth in duel.* Of the other items, he could only be said to have succeeded at keeping emotional distance from Ron and Potter, not of his own accord. And finding Dobby, which he had done even less to accomplish. And he told himself he had gotten over his obsession with Potter by all this enforced distance. But the thought of dueling him yet again sent shivers through Draco anytime he thought of it. Draco told himself that was just from the knowledge he had to set a snake on him.

So Draco was stubborn. "I want to duel Potter," he kept insisting. He earned himself a murmur that sounded like *Vain boy* before Severus contemptuously banished him from his sight. Or at least he tried, but then there was a knocking at the door.

"Expecting company?" Draco teased, arching an eyebrow to see someone show up at such a late hour. Severus shook his head before stalking over to wrench the door open.

He did so with such vehemence that the lilac-robed visitor stumbled back, nearly falling over his own feet. "Ah, Severus!" Lockhart said brightly, regaining his balance and striding in past a nonplused Severus as if nothing had happened. "Good! I see you're still awake! And oh, you have company- Mr. Malfoy!" His beaming face lost some of its irrepressible cheer. "I hope you're doing well. No ill effects from the, ah, slight mishap after the Gryffindor match, is there? Don't tell me that's why you're with the Potions master..."

Clearly Severus's status as Draco's godfather had not spread throughout the faculty. Say that much for McGonagall's discretion. It had to help that Severus had been less attentive after Draco had demolished his fireplace. Luckily the wall had been lacquered over again, in time for this unwanted visitor. Draco still caught Lockhart casting an apprehensive stare at the darker color of that section as he avoided Draco's gaze.

"I'm fine, sir," Draco said politely. "Professor Snape was just advising me that you'll be holding a dueling club tomorrow night. As I'm one of the best students in Slytherin at practical magic, he wanted to be sure I was planning to attend."

That earned Draco a formidable glare from Severus, but they had this oblivious peacock between them as a buffer. "Oh, that's wonderful!" Lockhart exclaimed, looking reassured that neither Draco nor his Head of House bore a grudge for his blundering. He had been giving Draco a wide berth in Defense classes, which Draco had rather enjoyed. He hoped Lockhart didn't take this as an excuse to get friendly now. The man was exhausting. "Excited about my little club, are we, Severus?"

"Thrilled," Severus intoned, and a human being might never have sounded less thrilled about anything.

Lockhart didn't catch the sarcasm, or at least chose to ignore it. "That's why I've come to see you, Severus, as a matter of fact," he trilled, staring at Severus with dewy eyes. "You see, I happen to be in search of an assistant."

Draco tensed at that word, as did Severus. "You have come," Severus said icily, "To invite *me* to be *your* assistant?"

Lockhart got a supercilious look on his face. "I have heard you've applied for the Defense position several times, Severus. I would think you would welcome the chance to show off your skills as an instructor in that position. Unless you feel you are not up to the task." This transparent attempt at manipulation was playing with fire. Draco had rarely seen anyone make Severus go from 0 to 100 this rapidly, as he could feel the air drop 20 degrees in the already frosty dungeons. "I would understand, if a mere professor would hesitate to undertake a dueling demonstration with as storied and accomplished a wizard as myself-"

"I will assist you, Lockhart," Severus said through gritted teeth. "As... you... wish. Now leave me be."

Lockhart nodded with a spreading smile, clearly having no idea what he'd just sentenced himself to, and offered to escort Draco back to his dorm. Severus impatiently shooed them off. Draco tried to keep from smirking too openly up at the preening professor as he led them through the dungeon halls. It wouldn't do to give the game away, and make Lockhart choose not to give a demonstration with Severus after all. If Draco wiped out one of his most cherished memories, could he really be said to have improved the red line at all?

"Your Head of House is a very... interesting man," Lockhart observed diplomatically as they walked. "Do you happen to know if he has any dueling experience?"

Already thinking twice, are you? "Oh, just a bit," Draco said innocently. Lockhart must not have heard of the whole Death Eater past thing Severus had going on. Some Defense professor. "Not very much, I don't think. Nothing compared to you, sir."

"I'm sure that's true," Lockhart said, puffing himself up. "There must be a reason the man's never gotten the Defense job, and Dumbledore's had him stick to Potions."

Please. I *could eviscerate you in a duel, you strutting ignoramus, let alone Severus. If it was a real duel tomorrow, he could have you dead where you stood before you even got off a single spell.*

"Maybe," Draco confined himself to saying inanely. "Everyone has different talents, don't they?"

"Yes," Lockhart said, frowning. "And his chambers... they've got quite an, er, ascetic sort of ambience to them, don't they?" Better than Lockhart's gallery of self-portraits, to be sure, but it was true that Severus could aspire to more of a happy medium. Draco might have to work on improving that sometime, to keep Severus's rooms from being sneered at. Not that Lockhart looked sneering so much as pitying, or perhaps curious. "I reckon he doesn't get many visitors, does he?"

"He seems like a very private man," Draco said, and Lockhart nodded in agreement.

"Well, then," Lockhart said happily. "I might just have to make an effort to brighten up his lonely life a little!"

On the night of the dueling club, Draco found Severus looking up at the charmed sky of the Great Hall, seeming rather pleased to see it no longer twinkling for once, but a velvety black. As Draco remembered, there would be quite the crowd for the impending show, and Potter had showed up in it with his friends, only to look comically displeased at the sight of Lockhart and Severus as their teachers. Probably the worst duelist of all the professors there, but also the undisputed best, not that Draco was biased.

Draco didn't know who had told Lockhart he looked good in that plummy shade of purple, but whatever their job was, they ought to be fired from it.

Lockhart waved an arm for silence and called, "Gather round, gather round! Can everyone see me? Can you all hear me? Excellent! Now, Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little Dueling Club, to train you all up in case you ever need to defend yourselves as I myself have done on countless occasions- for full details, see my published works. Let me introduce my assistant Professor Snape," he went on with a smile that Draco was pleased to know would be battered off it soon enough. *Assistant*, the preening Murtlap said, when he should already know that when Snape's lip curled like that, it was better to beg for forgiveness than even try to run. "He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about dueling himself and has sportingly agreed to help me with a short demonstration before we begin. Now, I don't want any of you youngsters to worry- you'll still have your Potions master when I'm through with him, never fear!"

Lockhart and Severus turned to face each other and bowed, though Severus had dignity enough not to give a proper bow to the purple peacock. Draco's heart beat faster watching them raise their wands, thinking how soon he would have to do the same against Potter.

"As you see, we are holding our wands in the accepted combative position," Lockhart told them all. "On the count of three, we will cast our first spells. Neither of us will be aiming to kill, of course."

"One- two- three-"

"Expelliarmus," Draco mouthed along with Severus, as he shouted and the scarlet light from his wand blew the peacock away. It was quite a satisfying smack he made against the wall, before he toppled down to the floor. Merlin, it had almost been worth going back in time to see this again. He gave the loudest cheer, drawing stares, though many of the other Slytherins followed.

If Severus was to die again, this might just be how Draco wanted to remember him: cool, calm, collected, utterly undaunted and above all of the idiocy around him, the man who could do anything. This was his godfather.

Potter stared at him after he cheered, and Draco made a juvenile face back at him, scrunching up his features and wiggling his head to the side. Out of all the things Draco had allegedly done, was celebrating his godfather's success really worth looking at him for?

Lockhart's hair was a mess, which had to drive him crazy. It took him an entertainingly long time for him to get back on his feet. "Well, there you have it!" he said, tottering back onto the platform. "That was a Disarming Charm- as you see, I've lost my wand- ah, thank you, Miss Brown. Yes, an excellent idea to show them that, Professor Snape, but if you don't mind my saying so, it was very obvious what you were about to do. If I had wanted to stop you it would have been only too easy. However, I felt it would be instructive to let them see..."

Oh, Severus did not look happy at that. *It's okay, Severus, in a few months he'll be too busy in St. Mungo's to tell any of those self-aggrandizing lies anymore.*

"Enough demonstrating! I'm going to come amongst you now and put you all into pairs. Professor Snape, if you'd like to help me..."

The first snag, though, was that Severus had no intention of allowing Draco to duel Potter. He pulled Draco right to Vince, who looked like his life began flashing before his eyes. Draco yelled out to Potter, "What do you say? Fancy a rematch?"

Severus groaned and rubbed his eyes, and Potter turned with a genuinely surprised look on his face. He couldn't have expected Draco to forget his existence that quickly. *He* spent enough time tracking Draco's movements around the castle for Draco to notice him. Time for the magic words. "Scared, Potter?"

"Absolutely not," Hermione said, stepping between them, and Draco shook off Severus and advanced on them with the school growing quiet around them.

"Well, if *you'd* rather take me on, Granger, I wouldn't mind," Draco drawled. "Seeing as you're the only one of your pathetic little do-gooder trio with *balls*..."

"Fine, Malfoy," Potter spat, and stalked right up.

"Draco," Severus said low in his ear, "This is *folly*," and was so lax in his duty of pairing students that Lockhart had to come over and see what was the matter. His simpering left Severus looking sour he had not used a far more painful spell than Expelliarmus on the Defense professor.

When they were ordered to bow, Potter bowed about as much as Severus had to Lockhart, his green eyes fixing on Draco in a way they hadn't since the Quidditch match over a month ago. The swimming feeling that put into Draco's gut was hardly conducive to observing proper dueling etiquette for himself, either.

"Wands at the ready!" shouted Lockhart. "When I count to three, cast your charms to disarm your opponent- only to disarm them- we don't want any accidents. One... two... three..."

"Rictusempra!"

The universe once again proved that doing the right thing gave you nothing but grief. Draco had waited until the count was over this time, which of course meant Potter's faster reflexes got a spell off first. The tickling sensation combined badly with the butterflies Potter had already put in his stomach, and he had to fight his instinct to cast Stupefy right away at his assailant. And Potter was just standing there watching nervously, not pressing his advantage, being noble.

Somewhere, Lockhart was shouting, "I said disarm only," and just about every student at Hogwarts was there ignoring him.

Draco couldn't remember the spell he'd cast on Potter the last time, but he could hardly let that ridiculous jinx go unpunished. Even if it was a step up from Spongify. "Rictusempra," he cast in return, and let Potter see how he liked being tickled back.

"Stop! Stop!" Lockhart was shouting, ignored.

"Finite incantatem," Severus cast, ending the jinxes on the students each in turn, with the awful laughter that had afflicted both Potter and Draco sliding to a holt. The air above them was green with smoke, which made Draco inclined to suspect a Slytherin behind it. Longbottom and a Hufflepuff were on the ground, Finnigan was rubbing his stomach where a similarly successful Tickling Jinx from Ron seemed to have felled him completely. The two first-year girls who'd been unable to find a partner in their own houses, Girl Weasley and Lovegood, had seemed to manage to cast nothing at each other but tufts of smoke, while the pair of girls beside them were a different story. Hermione was down on the ground with Pansy jabbing her wand in her face, having cast Salazar knew what. It only took Draco calling out Pansy's name, though, to make her back off.

"Dear, dear," said Lockhart, advising the students in the aftermath of the duels in his singularly inept fashion. Draco wondered if Hermione still somehow held her bizarre infatuation with the man, and it was a sting to realize he had no idea. "Up you get, Macmillan... careful there, Miss Fawcett... pinch it hard, it'll stop bleeding in a second, Boot... I think I'd better teach you how to block unfriendly spells. Let's have a volunteer pair- Longbottom and Finch-Fletchley, how about you?" Why did so many Hufflepuffs have preposterous names? Was it a hidden value that the Sorting Hat searched for?

"A bad idea, Professor Lockhart," Severus said, eyeing Longbottom with his customary disdain. Draco had come to regard Severus's perspective with more sympathy since Halloween, as even a friendly attempt to advise Longbottom on one of his potions had Longbottom shrieking and staggering away like he'd been cursed. "Longbottom causes devastation with the simplest spells. We'll be sending what's left of Finch-Fletchley up to the hospital wing in a matchbox." Draco grinned seeing how red that made Longbottom, before Severus ruined it by saying, "How about Granger and Parkinson?"

Draco sidled up to Lockhart before he could answer. "But what about Harry Potter, sir? Wouldn't it be something, to be able to say you were the professor who taught the Boy Who Lived how to duel?"

"Malfoy and Potter!" Lockhart called out excitedly. Draco was more taken aback than anything else at how easy the man had been to manipulate. Potter glared at Draco, clearly seeing how he'd set it up. Severus looked none too kindly on Draco either, before he was forced to back away with the rest of the crowd, to give space for their duel.

"Now, Harry," said Lockhart, "When Draco points his wand at you, you do this."

From the wiggly sort of squiggle he made in the air, Draco was quite sure that if Lockhart had become Potter's dueling tutor for real, even Voldemort would have been disappointed in his nemesis. Then Lockhart dropped his wand, and Draco tried to hide his annoyance. All of the man's clowning came to seem macabre when Draco thought of the war to come. "Whoops- my wand is a little over-excited." He glanced nervously at Severus after saying so.

Draco waited for Severus to supply him the spell to use, but he didn't, not having wanted Draco to have this duel in the first place. It didn't matter, though. It wasn't hard to remember *Serpensortia.* "Any advice, sir?" he asked Severus, while Potter nervously asked Lockhart to show him the blocking spell again, and Severus just looked unimpressed.

"Do not murder the Boy Who Lived," he intoned. "There are *far* too many witnesses."

Then Lockhart was stepping between them, and Draco visualized the snake he'd summoned earlier, trying it in a dark corner of the dungeons. He'd had as much ease with conjuring it as he had killing it with Sectumsempra. Not that he intended to use that second curse on Potter, but doing it had felt all too good.

"Three- two- one- go!" Lockhart shouted, and as soon as he stepped aside, things began to go wrong.

"Serpen-" Draco began, as quickly as he could, but Potter was already locked on for the kill. Lockhart barely even finished saying go before he had sprung forward.

"Expelliarmus!" he shouted. Quick study, that Potter.

"Protego!" Draco cried, shielding against the red light that looked already more than effective enough to fell him.

"Expelliarmus!" Potter yelled again, advancing forward as light shot out into Draco's shield, lashing his wand in the air like some instinct told him that was how he could break it down, before letting it focus all in a bursting line forward. It was all Draco could do to make his shield hold against the magical power of Potter, more raw and potent even than anything he had felt explode out of the talon wand, shaking under the stress of holding this different magic back from it, this lighter but just as furious kind. The effort made his wand sting, so he gripped with both hands.

It didn't hurt as much as Ron's voice shouting, "Good work, Harry!" But it was close.

"Expulso!" Potter shouted- *been doing some research on your own, have we, Potter*- and Draco's shield broke. Draco dropped to the ground, dodging in time to miss Potter's next Expelliarmus, and pushed his wand up to shout Serpensortia, but Potter was too quick, swinging his wand around to lash at Draco again.

"Protego!" Draco was forced to cast. He could hear the hush throughout all the Great Hall, bated breath to see what the two of them would do, the Death Eater and the Boy Who Lived, the Heir of Slytherin and the Chosen One...

Draco had begun to sweat, realizing how easy Potter must have always taken it on him. Or maybe he had somehow never made Potter this angry last time, enough to bring out this power in him. Or at least it felt powerful from Draco's end, gasping with sweat pouring down his face, as Potter's magic poured out in waves over his shield in the silence, a cloud of brilliant red between them. Draco thought of trying to cast Langlock, but the moment he dropped his shield...

"Lumos maxima!" Draco yelled, and the brilliant light exploded in both their eyes, letting Draco take the roll to the side he had already mentally calculated, and done well enough that when he dropped his shield, no spell hit him. "Serpensortia," he could finally call, having to pull forcibly at his magic to make the snake come out, with how drained Potter had made him. At last it slithered out, long and glimmering and green. And, if his eyes weren't

mistaken, bigger than last time. Far bigger. It always *was* hard to hold back the power of the talon wand...

There were shrieks and cries of terror all about the hall as it became apparent what Draco had conjured. Potter jumped back, wand held before him defensively. There was more panic than Draco remembered, but he supposed he'd had to unveil it more dramatically this time, lowering the light to show it already there, poised to strike.

"The monster!" someone yelled.

Draco had to wonder about the standard of education at Hogwarts. How could anyone in their right mind think that measly conjuring was the fabled beast of the Chamber of Secrets? Not exactly a Basilisk. But it should do for Draco's purposes...

If the boy who Potter had been meant to save from the snake hadn't already turned and fled like his life depended on it, Longbottom's Hufflepuff partner showing an irritating amount of sense.

Nothing was as sedate as the last time, the eerie suspended calm that had given Potter time to speak to the snake and everyone around to see him doing it. Students were all fleeing the Great Hall en masse, in a panic perhaps augmented by the fact that their nominal dueling instructor and Defense professor seemed to have been among the first high-tailing it up the marble stairs.

Oh, Draco thought numbly. *I've caused a riot.*

But there was a pair right by the snake that had been too small and distracted to flee properly: Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood, the two first-year girls both staring at the snake in frozen fascination. Ginny was clinging to Luna's side mutely, eyes humongous, while Luna tried to reassure her. "We mustn't be afraid, Ginny. It won't hurt us. It's a *nice* snake."

Then on cue, Potter came forward to save his lady love, hissing at the snake like a walking miracle. Draco hid his exhausted smile as the snake slumped to the floor in turn, staring at Potter like he had charmed it, in a bow of submission. If this had been the fabled monster of Slytherin, Potter had defeated it that easily. Just with a word.

"See?" Lovegood said brightly to Ginny. "It's listening to him."

And then Severus had stepped between Potter and the snake and waved his wand, making the snake vanish in a small puff of black smoke. He was looking at Potter, assessing, as if Potter being a Parselmouth had never entered into his calculations. Maybe the thought was occurring to him that Potter could be the Heir of Slytherin, since he knew Draco wasn't. Or, knowing Severus, he was thinking whether he could *use* that idea against his least favorite student.

"Oh, *no*," Lovegood said sadly. "But it had such lovely *scales*."

Ginny just shook her head, and stepped away.

Shame that the hall had almost entirely emptied by now. But Severus, Potter, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Lovegood, and Draco were all there. That was more than enough.

"Miss Lovegood," Severus said, taking her by the shoulder. "You will speak to no one of this. I think we can safely conclude that the first meeting of the Dueling Club is over. Now come, girl, to Ravenclaw..."

Ron had put a protective arm around his still-trembling sister, but he waited until Severus was out of earshot before he called up towards the platform still tingling with magic and smoke, and asked, "You're a Parselmouth, Harry, why didn't you tell us?"

"I'm a what?" said Potter.

It was cruel enough that the universe had fated Draco to be defeated at every turn. The least it could have done was also make that ever-victorious adversary competent.

"A Parselmouth!" said Ron, "You can talk to snakes," and then he and Ginny were pushed aside by a shaking Hermione, vibrating with rage as she climbed up to Draco.

"What were you thinking? I *know* that was dark magic, I've read about it in a book! How could you perform a curse so dangerous against Harry? In a *school*!" Ginny let out a soft shriek, clinging to her brother at the words.

"It was just a snake, Hermione," Ron began, and Hermione ignored him.

"Were you trying to kill him?" Hermione shrieked, and Draco could only shrug lazily.

"If I'd been trying to *kill* him, Hermione," Draco drawled, "Trust me, he'd already be dead."

Hermione let out a yell of frustration. Her hand twitched like she wanted to slug him in the nose like in the blue loop, more than a year early. But she didn't. She just took her pet Potter and Weasleys and led her mass of idiots away.

Draco avoided any Gryffindor retaliation. And he only received a single detention from Lockhart, which he spent entirely in questioning Draco in minute, moony-eyed detail about the Potions master.

Christmas Day

Chapter Notes

Hello all! In answer to some questions, first, as to how much better Harry was at the duel- Draco is correct that Harry did some research first this time, thinking he might duel Draco. But moreover, I see Harry's power as very raw and emotion-driven, drawing the pure power he has from the remnants of Voldemort in him, which can explode semi-uncontrolled. And unlike a more distant rival, this Draco brings out a very, very large number of conflicting, complex, powerful emotions in Harry. I won't say exactly what's going on in Harry's head about Draco, except that it's a mess.

As for Draco's massive inferiority complex towards Harry and lack of self-worth, I agree that it's frustrating- I love Draco and it's sad to have to write- but a lot of his issue is that he inevitably still views many of the people around him through the lens of what they did in the war first time around. This can make it difficult for him to see people clearly, especially Harry, Severus, and himself.

Anyway, thanks so much for all your comments and reactions! It's really fun to hear your thoughts and speculations! Enjoy! :)

Playlist

It snowed the next day and covered the castle in white, a blizzard without that would soon be followed by more coldness within. After all, Severus had told Draco how easily it was that with the enemy within, the stones of Hogwarts could fall.

Justin Finch-Fletchley and Nearly Headless Nick were due to be petrified, and so they were.

This time, though, Potter wasn't trying to patch things up with Finch-Fletchley. The Hufflepuff had fled too quickly from the fearsome Malfoy's snake to make it look like Potter was setting it on him, and so Potter wasn't in the vicinity when it happened. Draco might not be stopping the attacks on Muggleborns, which could lead to Hermione's death at any moment. But at least this time around, he was bettering Potter's *reputation.*

The thought of Hermione's death was still a gutting idea, even after she had yelled at him like that after the duel. Imagining her in Finch-Fletchley's place made him want to lie in bed, squeeze Imoogi, and not come out forever.

It was just Finch-Fletchley and Nick for now. He was left waiting all day to hear, without doing a thing other than bask in double the stares after the duel with Potter. He'd considered asking Dobby to follow Finch-Fletchley, rather than spending his free time watching over Potter like he usually did. But if Dobby got petrified or worse in the process, that was just

one more failure to add to the list. Dobby, Hermione, Ron and Harry and Severus and everyone he cared about- even the other second-year Slytherins, they were all at risk, and Draco wasn't doing a damn thing-

He could have told people it was a Basilisk months ago.

Draco talked his way into Severus's rooms for the second evening in a row, on the night of Finch-Fletchley's petrification. "Come to make a confession?" Severus asked silkily.

Draco pleaded for admittance, on the grounds he was still having lingering pain from the intense duel. Eventually, Severus let him in. Draco darted past the front parlor into Severus's library where, to his surprise, there was a Christmas tree set up. A small one, draped only in waves of silver foil and tinsel, but with a large number of charmed fireflies.

Despite so many times beholding the splendor of Malfoy Manor and Hogwarts, this was the most beautiful Christmas tree Draco had ever seen, the dreamy green of the fireflies blinking in and out. He thought so even before he saw a small vial at the foot of it with Draco's name attached to it.

Draco picked it up and smiled at its distinctive blue color. "I knew you still loved me!" Draco said excitedly, and Severus got an indescribably pained look on his face.

"If you inspect more closely," Severus said, rebuking, "You will discover that there are similar items in place for Mr. Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, and Zabini. As your Head of House, it is a duty I must take up, with *extreme* reluctance, to provide some sort of *festivity*, when an entire class worth of boys decides to stay."

He snorted at the astonished look on Draco's face. "Were you not aware your dormmates were also staying?"

Draco had been looking forward so much to peace and quiet.

"I see your vow to bond socially with your classmates has been lending *great* dividends, Mr. Malfoy."

"Stop calling me Mr. Malfoy, I know you want me to think you, like, hate me now or whatever," Draco laughed, "But it just sounds like my father, and we both know it, so stop! I promise to pretend you're still pretending not to be my godfather anymore."

Draco had never seen someone roll their eyes half so slowly and meaningfully as Severus did then. It was very impressive. He wished Severus would do it more than once, so Draco could get some idea how to properly imitate it.

"This pain, Draco, that you claim is still so pressing from your duel?"

"I think the monster petrifying students is a Basilisk!"

Severus pinched his forehead. "A Basilisk, you say? And how have you come to this *brilliant* conclusion?"

Because I'm from the future, Draco half-heartedly tried to say, but, of course, Langlock. So he said instead, "I've studied these things, because I'm going to be an Unspeakable." Then he lowered his voice sheepishly. "And I did use to be kind of obsessed with all forms of dragons and reptiles as a child. I know you remember that." He had known pretty much everything about Basilisks, along with a dozen other such snake-like magical creatures, back in second year the first time. Somehow he just hadn't connected the dots.

"How could one forget? I was chased about the fountain of Malfoy Manor, by the incensed Korean dragon your estranged aunt was so *short-sighted* as to gift upon you..." He frowned at Draco's fond smile. "You surely don't still *have* that thing, Draco."

"Oh, of course not."

"And so you have, in your infinite wisdom, determined that the creature petrifying students is a Basilisk. Whose gaze *kills* whoever beholds it. Not petrifies."

Or maybe that was why second-year Draco had never considered that the beast could be a Basilisk.

Maybe it wasn't a Basilisk this time? Or it had never been? It wasn't like *Draco* had been there to see Potter kill it. Maybe that was all Gryffindor propaganda, and what Potter had defeated was really just the delusions of grandeur of a small but spirited Nargle.

"But sir-"

"Out! You have wasted enough of my time. Go spout your foolish theories to your friends."

"I don't have any friends," Draco sulked, "Well, except Dobby."

Severus stared at him with a look like his godson had just decided to renounce magic and become a Nepalese goat-herder. "Who is *Dobby*? The house-elf from your manor that you got employment at Hogwarts? Did you just call him your *friend*?"

Draco shrugged. "I've been teaching him wizard's chess. Except now he's good enough he keeps beating me." He was seized with inspiration. "I should start teaching him exploding snap!"

Severus let his head thunk against the side of his armchair, in a rather fine impression of Dobby himself. "Enough, Draco. Go to your house elf, then, and leave your godfather to contemplate the futility of the human condition."

"Dobby says," Draco said brightly, "That hope is the only path to freedom!"

He was not sure if it was entirely acceptable for a professor to throw such a large book in his student's direction on his way out.

The second-year boys staying en masse was a phenomenon easily explained: simply put, their fathers had told them to. When Draco incredulously demanded why, Blaise and Theo said together, "Because *your* father told them to."

And here Draco and Father had been exchanging civil, if generic and largely untruthful letters this year, devoid of references to the Chamber of Secrets. He should have known better than to trust Father to behave.

"He's been telling all our families that you're the Heir of Slytherin," Vince said, poking his head out from his bed to give a badly-executed conspiratorial wink before withdrawing back into the curtains.

"And I guess we're meant to 'assist you'," Blaise said with a shrug. "Not that you're likely to let us, but anything beats Christmas dinner with Mum's newest walking corpse of a husband."

"I'd rather spend Christmas somewhere there's a half-decent library," Theo agreed. "If I was home, Father would make me go to your Heart of Winter gala this year, Draco. And I *hate* galas."

"Vince? Greg? Are you also similarly pleased to stay?" Draco asked tiredly.

Greg poked his head out with a guileless expression. "If Blaise stays, of course *we're* going to stay," he said, as if it was only obvious. That left no doubt where they had transferred their allegiance.

"You aren't going to let us in on anything, though, are you," Blaise sighed. "You know, I was starting to wonder if you weren't the Heir after all. But then your father's gone around saying it..."

Just like Father had always proclaimed the Malfoys descended from the blood of Slytherin. "He just knows there's rumors. Probably from the lot of you writing to *your* fathers. And he's not going to deny a rumor that makes him look powerful and important, is he?" Draco put on his best impression of Father. "*Well, my son's the Heir of Slytherin, killing all the chickens, don't you know?*"

None of them laughed. It didn't seem possible to win them back over. Not without falsely confessing to be the Heir and soothing their wounded egos. But maybe he would have tried harder, if they had just had the grace to laugh at his jokes. *Weasleys* were more obliging.

Christmas morning with this lot was a childish cacophony of noise, which he had to admit he preferred to last year's silence. The five second-year boys were the only Slytherins who'd stayed over, and they had the freedom of the dungeons. Sheer proximity threatened to make some of his old fondness for all of them creep back in. The level of joyful bragging about presents reminded him of the Gryffindor common room for once. Draco sat back watching for the most part, though with his curtains open. Before Vince could rip open a second box that was clearly also candy, Draco suggested they take their presents and open them under the Christmas tree with Severus.

It was one of the great pleasures of existence, to put that sort of look on Severus's face, when five twelve-year-old boys, levitating mountains of presents before them, appeared before nine in the morning at his door. As they settled in, Severus gave Draco a look that showed no doubt as to whom he held responsible for this unforeseen calamity. It was a piece of

astonishing daring in truth, to blow up Severus's rooms in November, and, in December, worse, fill it with *merriment*.

As the five of them heaped together at the foot of the tree, Severus was the severe adult figure supervising in the armchair above, a glass of whisky in hand that he was none too slow in finishing and replenishing. Draco managed to extract a perfunctory rendition from Severus of the tale of how Salazar Slytherin ruined Christmas, before Severus commanded the presents attended to.

Even Draco had almost never seen such a plethora of metallic green and silver wrapping. The parents seemed to have competed to outdo each other, perhaps to impress the Heir. And of course Father had taken the opposite approach to last year, and showered Draco with all kinds of unnecessary things. It would not do for the Malfoy heir not to have the most presents. He probably did, but at a point it became difficult to tell.

Draco had already sent off an owl with Hermione's fourth charm, a plain H charm to replicate the N for Narcissa on his mother's bracelet. Though he'd woken in a cold sweat 2 am Christmas Eve at the thought Hermione might think it was H for Heir instead. But there was no changing it now, so he directed his attention to the mixture before them of toys, books, fancy quills and stationery, clothes and shoes and jewelry, magical objects, snacks and candy. None of the boys had gotten each other anything, as it happened, but their parents had more than made up for it.

It was an endless expanse of expenditure that unfolded before them, with the wrapping paper piling high before Severus started at vanishing it. It was hard not to cringe at what Severus must think of all of them. Severus had not grown up with much wealth at all, and here he was, forced to witness these children crowing mindlessly over their ill-gotten gains.

Draco was glad he had bought more than one present for Severus this year. And he was so pleased with Theo for having gotten Severus one as well, he kissed him on the cheek. Theo turned redder than a Gryffindor Christmas tree, and the other boys hooted as Severus sighed, "*Mr.* Malfoy, if you would kindly allow me to open this from Mr. Nott... I do not believe we find ourselves in the presence of *mistletoe*..."

Severus remained deadpan as he opened the present, a book on rare poisons from sub-Saharan Africa, though Draco knew he was likely quite interested, unless he happened to already have it. He stayed just as level when he opened Draco's first two presents, an expensive new pair of dragon-hide gloves and a book on recent developments in spell creation theory.

But the corner of Severus's lips finally turned upwards at the sight of the last present from Draco. It was a hand-carved silver nameplate for his office desk, rather sleek and stylish if Draco did say so himself. It read *Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master, Inventor, and Duelist.*

"After all, sir," Draco said, widening his eyes to the picture of innocence, "You *must* be the greatest duelist in all the school if not the country, to have defeated as renowned and skilful a wizard as *Gilderoy Lockhart.*"

The hint of a smile that drew made Draco as warm as if Severus had let him have a sip of his whisky- which needless to say, he never did. He had hope Severus might use the nameplate, if not the book or gloves. After all, Severus was currently wearing the turquoise dragon Ouroboros ring Draco had given him last Christmas.

There turned out to be one more present for Severus under the tree, a long cylinder with golden wrapping paper that none of them would own up to leaving for him. That didn't keep Severus from blaming Draco for it, only to be unable to, once he opened it and saw it was in dramatically different taste than his godson's.

At least it looked expensive. A lavish tapestry was enclosed within the cylinder, with a scene of a beautiful meadow full of golden roses in the sunlight. There was even a wooden hook and sticking charm set to hang it. It looked the right size for the darkened wall where Severus had covered up his old fireplace. But Severus tossed it into his new fireplace without a second look. Vince picked up a note that had fallen from the gold paper. "From an anonymous admirer," he read aloud, and Severus took the note from his hand and tossed it contemptuously into the fire as well.

After giving them all vials of Draught of Peace, Severus led them in their loud chattering pack up to Christmas dinner. The Great Hall somehow looked even more splendid than last year, with all of the frost on Hagrid's trees and an enchanted snowfall. Draco stopped at the threshold, remembering with a pang Hagrid's previous round of decorations, at Halloween not even two months ago, with Hermione and Potter and Ron at his side guessing together.

So little time had passed, and yet the distance between Draco and the Gryffindors that Christmas felt as unbreachable as a chasm of centuries, with Potter proudly wearing that ghastly Weasley Christmas jumper. Draco adjusted his new cream-colored cashmere jumper with pearl buttons from Mother, worn under open robes to show off the gleaming sea pearls. He told himself the contrast was unfavorable towards Potter.

Soon, Dumbledore struck up his favorite carols. A steadily more eggnog-soused Hagrid began his usual Christmas shenanigans, with no idea it was not long now before he would become the school board's prime suspect. Draco was unable to convince Blaise and Theo that Christmas crackers were for plebeians, as he had so easily with Vince and Greg in the blue line. And Vince and Greg followed Blaise's example now, not his. When Draco began to sputter incoherently, waving his arms in disbelief at Blaise and his cronies setting off cracker after cracker, Theo burst out laughing so loud Potter's gaze was drawn. Draco stared back defiantly until he turned away again.

Potter's trio left early, but not early enough to miss Blaise haranguing Severus into writing a note permitting them to use the Quidditch pitch at 3. Potter stopped walking, which made Draco fear he was about to try and start up some impromptu Gryffindor-Slytherin grudge match. He was certainly equipped with an excess of sporting gingers. But no matter how many people Draco had tortured in the blue loop, no one deserved to lose at Quidditch to Potter on *Christmas.*

"Count me out," Draco said hastily. "I'm going to send an owl." When the Slytherins protested, Draco quipped, "Very important blood magic to perform, you know, the Yule is

ideal for it," and the Gryffindors nearby got faces like they couldn't tell whether or not Draco was joking.

Draco went all the way up to the Owlery for appearances, in case Potter was following him again. But he found himself alone with just the hooting, taking a piece of the new stationery Mother had sent and penning a brief note wishing her Happy Christmas. He sent it off with one of the school owls. Then he turned to go, and almost jumped out of his skin when he saw Blaise and Theo standing there in plain Slytherin robes, watching him.

"What the hell?" Draco barked, springing backwards. "You startled me! Why aren't you getting ready to play Quidditch?"

Blaise and Theo exchanged looks. "We didn't feel like it, Draco. But, uh, Crabbe and Goyle are still going out to play," Blaise mumbled, which sent up red flags in Draco's head for countless reasons, chiefly among which were A. Blaise usually called them Vince and Greg, B. Blaise had been the one to propose the game, and C. Vince and Greg weren't exactly capable of carrying out a Quidditch match on their lonesome.

"What's wrong?" Draco asked warily, suspecting some attempt to lure him into confessing the truth about being the Heir of Slytherin, and as they followed him down towards the dungeons a bit as his heels, their line of discussion rather confirmed it.

"I saw Potter looking at you at Christmas dinner today," Theo said. "Do you think he suspects you?"

"I know he suspects me," Draco drawled. "Though he never needed an excuse to stare at me before, did he?"

Theo let out an unusual choking sound before Blaise elbowed him in the side. "Do you think he knows anything?" Blaise asked, with an unusual level of anxiety for Draco's welfare.

"Potter?" Draco said with a shrug, "Potter wouldn't know how to spell his way out of a paper bag. I am hardly losing sleep at night worrying about what *Potter* knows."

"Didn't keep him from beating you at Quidditch, though, did it?" Theo asked with a strange animosity in his tone, before Blaise again seemed to admonish him.

If this was an attempt to extract information, he would have expected his fellow Slytherins to do a better job at it. Instead, they were just acting like weirdos. He was distracted enough as he approached the entrance to the Slytherin dungeons that the password dropped out of his mind. "Theo, what's the password?"

"Er, I'm not sure," said Theo, who had never forgotten the password in all his years, in the blue line or red line. Had someone been casting Confundus charms on them?

"Blaise?"

"No clue, mate," said Blaise, who had never called Draco *mate* in his life.

"Let me think," Draco said, concentrating. He remembered it was *Pureblood*, but waited to see if his befuddled dormmates could come up with it on its own.

"Uh, Snakewood?" Theo tried weakly, staring at the entrance as if he was willing it to open. That was stupid. Hadn't Snakewood been one of the passwords last year? For some reason, it stuck out in Draco's memory-

Draco had never forgotten that conversation, try as he had. *Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater,* Potter had told him. Draco had been so beside himself, he'd said the Slytherin password in front of Potter. *Snakewood.*

On more than one of those secret radio reports by Lee Jordan during the war, Potterwatch, there had been admiring talk of Potter's trio sneaking into the Ministry of Magic, using Polyjuice Potion.

"Oh, right. Pureblood," Draco pretended to remember. The entrance slid open, but Draco didn't walk in. 'Blaise' and 'Theo' exchanged telltale worried glances, more companionable with each other than they would ever deign to show in reality. "Blaise, get me my favorite mutant squirrel eggs from Dobby in the kitchen. He knows what kind. And don't you dare come back without them, or I'll curse you."

And the real Blaise would have told him where he could stick his mutant squirrel eggs, as if that was even a thing. But the imposter exchanged glances with Theo, before going, "Sure, mate," and hustling towards the stairs.

Ron for sure, then. Hermione wouldn't be calling him *mate* so much.

She'd said she was working on a project soon to clear his name. Had this been what she meant? Polyjuice her idiots into Slytherin forms and trick him into revealing the truth?

But they had incredibly low observational skills for Slytherin dynamics, if they thought Draco could issue desultory commands and threats to *Blaise Zabini* and have him scamper to obey. Not much point in assuming a disguise if you couldn't perform the person behind it.

So Draco found himself faced with Harry Potter, trapped for whatever remained of sixty minutes in the shape of Theodore Nott. He was unsure whether to be angered or flattered that the Gryffindors thought him worth this much trouble to crack. Second-years brewing Polyjuice, almost definitely on their own? Merlin, Hermione was a miracle. Potter, not so much.

Potter followed Draco self-consciously into the Slytherin common room, trying to look past the serpent-carved fireplace and green lamps like he wasn't seeing them for the first time. He kept good pace with Draco on the way to their dorm, but every gesture was Potter's. Now that Draco had realized, Harry Potter as an essence seemed to bleed out of those very pores. But he had to be sure, he told himself, before he let himself have fun with this.

"That was funny, wasn't it, Theo?" Draco tested. "Professor Snape's face when I kissed you at the Christmas tree this morning?"

And sure enough, there was shock-disbelief-panic on that unusually expressive version of Theo's face, before Potter could muster up a weak, "Yeah, I don't think Snape much likes watching his students snogging."

Snogging? Potter would have no idea that it had just been a kiss on the cheek. Draco hadn't specified, and now that misunderstanding gave him an evil idea. "He *is* my godfather. Even though he says he approves of us, he probably doesn't want it rubbed in his face." Draco strolled over to his own bed, and tossed off his robe before planting himself on the edge. "Come here."

Potter walked over like the condemned approaching the guillotine. "Um, Draco, what are you..."

"I know why you ditched Quidditch with everyone," Draco said in a low purr, and crooked his finger at Potter. "It'll be better to kiss me, won't it, without my godfather watching?"

"Oh, uh, yeah, I guess," Potter said. Draco was pleasantly surprised to see him commit enough to his deception to kick off his shoes and climb onto Draco's bed. He looked to regret it, as Draco cast Muffliato and Spelunca secure. "Wait, what are you doing?"

"Keeping us from being interrupted," Draco said, and stared at the dirty blond hair over Potter's forehead, falling over his pillow. He'd had Theo in his bed more than a few times in the Slytherin dorms, but in later years. And it was disturbingly easy to picture this familiar sandy hair now as unrulier and darker. "We can't have that, can we?"

"No," Potter said, visibly struggling to keep his composure. He lay down on the bed, facing him on his side. Draco had lain in the same position with Hermione, back when they visited each other's families, a lifetime ago. "No, that... would not be good, no."

Draco tossed his head, pushing his own hair out of his eyes, and watched Potter rake a hand through Theo's shorter hair in turn. Oh, what an imaginary conundrum he'd trapped Potter in.

"Did you like my Christmas present?" Draco asked, having given the real Theo no such thing, and Potter nodded.

"Yeah, it was wonderful, Draco," he lied rather poorly. "Just what I wanted."

"Why are you being so awkward?" Draco asked sweetly. "It's just you and me, baby," and watched Theodore Nott's face express a level of embarrassment that should have been biologically impossible for a Slytherin. He couldn't believe Potter still thought he was fooling him.

"I guess I've just been tense recently," Potter said, rallying at last, with a very Potter-like glint that almost gave those very blue eyes the illusion of green in them. "You know, with everything that's been going on recently. Everything they've been saying about you, Draco. I..." Potter licked his lips, staring Draco in the eye as he propped up his chin on his hand. "I just like you so much, Draco. I don't want to think what they're saying is true."

The bastard wanted to play dirty, did he? Fine. "Oh, come on," Draco purred, like he was in some poorly written romantic novel, "Don't you trust me, baby?"

"I- God, um, Draco-" Potter seemed to be losing his ability to make coherent sentences, never a problem for Theo. Granted, sometimes that would have made Theo more tolerable, but that was a memory for another time. "No, of course I trust you- or I want to. I want to believe in you, you just make it hard sometimes. But I do want to. Because I really like you. You know that."

Draco felt a sharp pang in his chest, reminded of the last conversation they'd had as anything but enemies. "Well, I more than like you," Draco said, lowering his voice. "You know that, don't you? So if there's anything you need to ask me, baby, just ask it."

"Draco," Potter said, taking a deep breath, "Are you the Heir of Slytherin?"

For a split second, Draco considered saying yes, just to fuck with him.

"No," Draco said, "Of course I'm not, how could you think that," and made a sad face.

Potter looked like he might be genuinely guilty for asking, even in the person of Theo. "I'm sorry, Draco. Baby," he said, gingerly trying out the word on his lips. Draco had not thought he would take half this well to the part. "I just wish everyone else didn't say that about you."

Time to up the ante. "It doesn't matter what they say," Draco said thickly, "I only care what *you* think," and seemed to give Potter a heart attack then, just by undoing the top button on his own cashmere jumper. "Oh," Draco said, deliberately misinterpreting Potter's stare, "Do you like the jumper my mother gave me," and slid another one of the sea pearls out from between the soft cashmere, and then the last. "Or is it just my throat you like..." He pushed his sleek hair aside and tilted his head back, exposing his neck and the top of his collarbones. He felt Potter's helpless stare there. "You can give me a kiss there if you want. And you do want to, don't you?"

"No, um, I'm okay," Potter said, voice nearly breaking, and Draco turned to pout at him from very close.

"Baby," Draco whined, sticking out his lower lip, "Why won't you give me a kiss?"

"I'm just, er, shy," Potter said desperately, and scooted further away.

"I know you want to kiss me, baby," Draco sighed, and leaned his head back on the pillow, giving Harry a half-lidded stare. He kept his lips parted, as if in expectation to be kissed. "Aren't you going to take what you want?"

Harry stared at him helplessly, fingers sliding through Draco's hair, before he wrenched himself away with a gasp, sitting up and panting.

Draco sat up then too, delivering his best eye-roll in imitation of Severus. "So that's the line you draw for saving the school? You won't kiss a Death Eater even for that, Harry Potter?"

Potter's face went white. He backed away only to feel curtains against his back, the charm seeming to surprise him with how tightly it held their shape. "What- I- why are you calling me that?"

"Why do you think?" Draco said with a sigh, rolling his eyes and doing the buttons back up at his collar. "I was only sure when you guessed that password I said in front of you, but I'd suspected it was you and Ron since the minute you two started calling Vince and Greg *Crabbe and Goyle.*"

"Oh," Potter said sheepishly. "Right, I guess we forgot their first names..."

"I am forever staggered," Draco said drolly, "Not just by the courage of Gryffindor schemes, but by the depth of *research* behind them. The curtains are spelled shut, you won't be able to get out even if you try." Potter seemed to tense further. "Relax, Chosen One, I had no intention of going through with it, not with *you*. I was just testing you. I was never going to *ravage* you..."

"Oh," Potter said faintly, with a face like his brain hadn't started working again. "Yeah, um, I guess Nott would be upset about that... I'm sorry- I didn't realize when I picked to be him that you and him were, uh... yeah..."

Draco had to blink to process that. "What? No, I'm not dating Nott. I told you, that was a test. The more you played along, the more I knew you *weren't* Theo. Did you really think I've been *snogging* him?" Potter shrugged weakly. "Potter, we're *twelve.*"

"I don't know, Draco," Potter said miserably. "I can never figure out what you're going to do."

A better person would have taken pity then. But this was Draco Malfoy.

"Let me tell you what I've gathered so far of your moronic plan. You somehow got hair or something from Blaise and Theo, took the Polyjuice Potion- what, you don't think I know what that is? -" Newsflash, Potter, my godfather is one of the finest Potions masters of our age- the Polyjuice that Hermione somehow, miraculously, successfully brewed for you, and so she-"

"Ron and I helped," Potter said defensively.

"She sent her little minions off to question me, thinking I would tell the truth to other Slytherins..." As if Draco would have confided in Blaise or Theo anyway, even if he hadn't figured the plan out. Hermione seriously overestimated his capacity to make other friendships. "And that I'd implicate myself that way, so you'd know for sure that I was the monster, right?"

"Hermione was hoping to prove you were *innocent*, Draco," Potter said earnestly. "She was going to come. I don't think she liked turning into Bulstrode... but Draco, she's always said you're not the Heir and this would prove it-"

"And I guess I messed up that opportunity by figuring it out, did I? I spend weeks carving a charm to give her for Christmas, and her Christmas gift to me is *this.* Quite something,

Gryffindor friendship."

"I think she might have also bought you a scarf?"

Potter looked alarmed when Draco began to laugh. "Oh, uh, Draco, I'm sorry, but do you think you could possibly, uh, let me go, please?"

"Not before you ask your questions, Potter. Get what you came for. You won't believe me now that I figured you out, but ask them."

Potter's face showed such a mix of guilt and doubt, it was a miracle his feeble mind kept working at all. "Draco, what does that diary you took from Ginny have to do with the Chamber of Secrets?"

Not a bad question. "I don't know exactly. Probably nothing, because Severus destroyed the diary for good, I'm sure of it. With something called liquid Fiendfyre. It's not something I can think of any way to explain that *you'd* understand."

"Who's doing this if not you? Some other Slytherin?"

"I don't associate with other Slytherins as much as you think. I'd like to believe it isn't any of my dormmates sneaking around under my nose, but I can't be sure. I'm not close to any of them."

Potter frowned. "Not even Nott? Then who are you close to?"

Draco bit his lip, trying to keep up an arrogant face. "No one." Then he gave in to temptation and tugged at the ends of that mussed-up dark blond hair. "Except you. Right now."

"*Draco*," Potter began, but then they jolted at the sound of doors opening, feet on the stairs, and the other second-years coming in.

"You think Draco's still at the Owlery?" Blaise's voice asked from outside the curtains. "Or just locked in bed like always?"

"No way of knowing," Theo's voice replied. "Hey, Vince, did you see that nameplate he got Professor Snape?"

"Let me out," Potter hissed frantically. "While I'm still Nott, before I turn back..."

"Aside from the fact that Theo and I lying in bed together is not at all normal," Draco sighed, "You might find that plan complicated, Potter, by the fact that Theodore Nott is also standing right outside these curtains. He was just *talking*. Did you set out to impersonate him without even finding out what his *voice* sounds like?"

"Ssh!"

"Did you not hear me cast a muffling charm?" Draco flopped back down against the pillow.

"But we can hear them," Potter said blankly.

"It's one-sided," Draco yawned. "You'd better hope they move on and leave again before your potion wears out, Potter, or we're both going to be in trouble."

"You mean because I'm a Gryffindor in the Slytherin dorm?" Draco wanted to whack him over the head like Hermione would, because he had to be being purposefully obtuse at this point.

"Oh, yes, Potter, *that* would be the most scandalous thing about seeing Harry Potter stumble out of my bed," Draco drawled. "In a Slytherin uniform, no less. Did Hermione transfigure that for you?" A mortified nod. "Getting the picture, are you?"

"Oh my God," Potter said, burying his face in his hands, "My life is over."

Draco chose not to tell him of his power to threaten all of his dormmates into secrecy with threats of Langlock. It was more fun this way.

Potter buried his face in the pillow, reaching to pull the side against his face, and his hand encountered something. "What is this?" he asked, and pulled Imoogi out from under the pillow where Draco had stashed her.

"The monster of the Chamber of Secrets," Draco deadpanned.

And in that amazed stare of Potter's, Draco could see it click into his disguised eyes, if only a moment: the boy before him couldn't possibly be the Heir of Slytherin. Even if that brief flash of sanity did not linger for long. "Is this a toy? A plush stuffed dragon?" Potter marveled, turning her over in his hands.

"Her name," Draco said indignantly, cuddling her to his chest, "Is Imoogi, if you must know. And she is a very *important* dragon. She was a present from my Aunt Andromeda- no, not the Death Eater one- who my family never speaks to, so she's *special*." Potter had to blink rapidly to absorb that information. "And her name is taken from a very beautiful Korean legend, about a dragon who was born disguised as a girl until her 18th birthday- hey! Stop laughing!"

"What the hell, you're so cute," Potter laughed, and Draco whacked at him with Imoogi.

"Shut up!" Draco whined, and started to poke at him with Imoogi's horns. "Do you want to hear the story or not? There's a good reason she's here."

"Okay, fine," went Potter, his eyes shining at him, and it wasn't just Draco's imagination that those eyes were starting to look green again. Potter's face was turning back from Theo's to his own with each second, features each striking Draco anew as they appeared.

"Imoogi," Draco said, "Turned into a dragon on her 18th birthday. But before then, she was marked, with a dragon-shaped birthmark. And I was born with a dragon-shaped birthmark, and that's why I was named Draco in the first place. And you know, maybe," Draco lied, "When I turn 18, I might turn into a dragon too."

Potter stared at him in bafflement for a long moment, before reaching out and holding Imoogi's horns in place, toying with them back and forth so they couldn't keep poking him. "You're saying this stuffed dragon is magical?" Draco shook his head. "Oh, so pretty much, that story is your excuse for why you still sleep with a teddy bear?"

"Shut *up*!" Draco whined. "Oh, won't you be proud to go running back to Ron and Hermione, telling them you've uncovered the secret monster of the Chamber of Secrets." He wiggled Imoogi in a face that was now unmistakably Harry Potter's.

Potter pushed the stuffed dragon aside, and stared for so long that Draco started to think foolish things, like Potter was about to curse him, or far more unlikely, *kiss* him. Finally, Potter just asked, "Do you really have a dragon-shaped birthmark?" Draco nodded. "Can I see it?" Potter reached into his pocket and got his glasses back out.

Draco wouldn't have complied if it was anyone but Potter asking. But for some reason, his hands did as told, pulling the jumper over his head.

"Wait, what are you doing?" Potter panicked. "You didn't say where the birthmark *was*-"

"Relax, Potter, it's on my shoulder," Draco said, and undid a few buttons of his white shirt before tugging it off his right shoulder. "Here, see? It's kind of a reddish copper."

"Where?" Potter said, and his fingers skimmed slowly over the skin, searching. The skin tingled wherever Potter touched, sending goosebumps over it.

"Here, numbskull," Draco said, and took Potter's fingers to guide them to the slightly raised mark of a dragon. In his defense, it did look like a dragon, with an individual snout, tail, and two wings. Potter traced the shape of it with his fingertip.

"There, you see, it really is a dragon..."

"It's pretty," Potter said softly.

And then they were both startled by a loud shout. "I'm hungry, Vince! You want to head down and see if there's any leftovers in the kitchens? Draco's house elf will give us some!"

Draco exhaled a sigh. "They'll all be going now from the sound of it," Draco said, and after typical Slytherin sniping, they could hear all four trail out and leave the dorm jarringly silent.

"You know them well," Potter said with absent-minded surprise, pulling his hand back from Draco's shoulder. Draco pulled his shirt up, feeling oddly bashful, and started re-buttoning it.

"I told you they aren't my friends, Potter," Draco said crossly. "That doesn't mean I haven't known them all since before I could walk. It just means we're not *friends*."

Draco feared that would conjure pity on Potter's face, but the way Potter was looking at him then was more complicated. "I guess I should try to sneak away before they come back," he said, sounding weirdly reluctant.

"Finite incantatem," Draco said, waving his wand around the curtains. "There. Free to go, Potter."

Potter pushed the curtains back and got up, somewhat unsteady. It was only when he was halfway across the room that Draco's mouth fell open in outrage.

"Potter!" he barked.

"What?" Potter gasped, freezing in his tracks, and walked back over. "What is it, Draco?"

It was like Potter thought Draco didn't want him to leave. "The dragon," Draco snapped, and Potter reached with a slow hand towards the mark on Draco's right shoulder. "The *stuffed* dragon," Draco clarified, and Potter looked down at where under his arm, Imoogi had somehow become trapped.

"Oh, bloody hell, sorry," Potter blurted, practically threw her at Draco, and fled the Slytherin dorms like Imoogi really had been the monster of the Chamber of Secrets.

The Golden Rose

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco had thought there might be a thawing with the Gryffindors after their Polyjuice attempt at interrogation, if only out of shame on their part. But January saw them still keeping a cautious distance, although less so. Avoiding him was more difficult now that Hermione had become a hospital-bound cat.

Draco laughed himself sick the first time he heard what happened with Millie's cat. "It's not funny!" Hermione kept insisting.

"Mr. Wilberforth? You tried to turn into *Mr. Wilberforth*?" he gasped, grabbing at his stomach as it began to hurt from laughing too hard. He got severe looks from the trio. "Millie thinks I'm trying to *kill* Mr. Wilberforth!"

From the looks on their faces, that fact had failed to make it any funnier.

She was stuck in the hospital wing, which made everyone think the prominent Muggleborn brainiac had become the next victim of the Heir. Opinions that Draco was the Heir waned at this supposition, as many did doubt Draco would have targeted his only friend. It almost convinced Draco's yearmates, before he admitted to them Hermione had just been put out of commission by a freak Potions accident. Then they started calling him the Heir again.

There was a problem at first with people coming past to gawk, which Draco was well aware of given his stubborn insistence on daily visits. He found himself in Gryffindor company more often than in months, simply by their visits often overlapping. Potter found it difficult for the first week or two to look him in the eye, though Draco had the smug feeling it had more to do with his brief sojourn in Draco's bed than suspicions about the Heir.

Eventually, Draco got sick of people going past trying to stick their heads in, and let it be known through the Slytherin second-years: just as those who spoke ill of Draco Malfoy's associates were liable to lose a working tongue, those who looked imprudently on Draco Malfoy's associates were liable to lose working *eyeballs*. Draco looked up and practiced the Conjunctivitis curse to back it up, but just the warning worked nicely. And Ron managed to work himself up to thanking Draco for it.

They still didn't speak to him much more than necessary, to Hermione's annoyance. And she admitted to him privately that Ron and Harry still talked about him like he might be the Heir of Slytherin when he wasn't around.

Bound to the hospital wing, she was so accessible that Draco found himself dreading her release, as horrible a friend as that made him. But he forced a cheery expression when Hermione left the hospital wing, de-whiskered, tail-less, and fur-free at the beginning of February.

Quidditch training ramped up in intensity as they approached the Ravenclaw-Slytherin match, coming up on the 20th. Flint had them meeting three times a week, which combined with Draco stubbornly sticking to his weekend night flights had his body sore and exhausted half the time. He would have been stealing all kinds of potions to assist him, had Severus's storerooms still been open to him. As it was, he saved the second Draught of Peace he had received at Christmas, same as the other Slytherin boys, and hoped he wouldn't need to use it against Ravenclaw.

Hermione took to sending him letters from the Owlery, as well as setting a brief meeting each week after Potions for them to check in. He was pleased to see her still sporting her bracelet once her arm had gone furless enough to wear it. If the H for Hermione she had now attached made her think of H for Heir instead, she had the grace not to say it.

The snow was beginning to melt around the grounds, along with a gradual melting in the strident pitch of terror that had used to follow Draco whenever he walked down the corridors. The mandrakes were maturing. Lockhart had declared the Heir scared off by his prowess, often loudly in Severus's exasperated hearing. And Hermione, of course, hadn't been a Christmas attack at all, just a cat. According to Draco's notebook, there wouldn't be any more attacks until May. That would have been comforting, except for the fact that it was Hermione along with Penelope Clearwater marked as the victim.

But before Valentine's Day had even passed, it felt as if May might never come. He thought he might have nightmares about Hermione being petrified, but instead, many of his dreams were just a confusion of Christmas Day playing out over and over again, Potter's fingers on his birthmark and the fireflies floating around Severus's tree, miles of green wrapping paper vanishing and Potter's fingers against his lips.

Any attempt to keep his mind off the romantic was derailed by the arrival of Valentine's Day. He'd written in the day's entry in his notebook, *Potter gets hilarious love message from Weasel Girl, I almost steal his diary but he takes it from me.* But he had forgotten just how extravagant the holiday became this one day, from a pink-robed Lockhart's influence. Nor were the other Slytherins any more ready for the spectacle that awaited them at breakfast, with the gaudy pink flowers that covered the walls, and the heart-shaped confetti that threatened to *mess up Draco's hair.*

"You know," Draco said shakily, "I promised Severus I wouldn't eat any meals in the kitchen with the elves again. But I think this qualifies as an emergency-" And then Severus's gaze came down to pierce him like an arrow from on high, a message that didn't need Occlumency to communicate, *If I have to suffer, my godson has to suffer too*.

Draco took a seat at the Slytherin table and propped his chin up on a disgruntled hand, forced to watch Lockhart's showboating all over again. "Happy Valentine's Day!" Lockhart shouted. "And may I thank the 46 people who have so far sent me cards! At least one of whom, I suspect, may have been a professor... Yes, I have taken the liberty of arranging this little

surprise for you all- and it doesn't end here!" Lockhart clapped his hands and through the doors to the Entrance Hall marched a dozen surly-looking dwarfs, whose dignity Lockhart had severely offended by dressing them with golden wings and carrying harps. Draco hoped he was paying them enough for this.

"My friendly, card-carrying cupids!" beamed Lockhart. "They will be roving around the school today delivering your Valentines! And the fun doesn't stop here! I'm sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to show you how to whip up a Love Potion!" Draco knew to watch Severus at the High Table this time, and he stored that utterly aghast look of nausea in his mental album for Severus, should the same fate ultimately come for him. "And while you're at it, Professor Flitwick knows more about Entrancing Enchantments than any wizard I've ever met, the sly old dog!"

Draco had been waylaid by a dwarf the first time around with a Valentine he pretended not to know was from Pansy. She had the dignity not to send him one this time around, though she couldn't help but send him a few moony stares over the course of the romantic day. *Gay,* he thought emphatically in her direction. *Gay, gay, gay, Pansy, what more is there to say?*

Draco enjoyed watching the exasperation of their teachers as the dwarves kept disrupting classes, and regretted Valentine's Day hadn't fallen on the same day as Potions, for him to witness the carnage that must be Severus's battle against romance. But he did get to witness the highlight of the day, possibly of the year aside from Severus's defeat of Lockhart. It was so anticipated, it had gone down in his notebook, even though objectively, it didn't seem that important to the course of the blue loop: Potter's *very special Valentine*.

Draco happened upon Potter with his bag broken, trying to gather up his supplies to flee. He was immediately recognizable, but Draco played it off as though he had happened upon this charming tableau by chance. "What is it, Potter, what's going on?" Draco asked in his most innocent voice. But the sight of him seemed to fill Potter with, if anything, *more* panic than Draco remembered.

"No, Ron, it's Draco, *Draco* can't see this," Potter babbled, "Help," staring first at his friends and then at the waiting first-years, Girl Weasley at the front. As if any of them could save him from *love.*

"What's all this commotion?" said Prefect Weasley, and Draco smirked.

"Oh, look, Potter, it's Ron's brother Peter, maybe he'll know what's going on," he drawled.

"Percy!" Peter protested. "My name is Percy!"

Potter seemed to take Peter's indignation as his best chance to flee the scene, but the dwarf seized him around the knees and brought him crashing to the floor. Draco had to cover his mouth, so the laughter wouldn't bubble out too loud. He couldn't miss the poetry for the ages about to be unveiled.

"Right," said the dwarf, sitting on Harry's ankles, "Here is your singing Valentine."

It had to have changed from last time. It couldn't have been this funny. Nothing in human history had ever been *this* funny.

His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,

His hair is as dark as a blackboard.

I wish he was mine, he's really divine,

The hero who conquered the Dark Lord.

Draco didn't know what it was that made it so hilarious. Maybe it was the sublime absurdity of the slant rhyme of *blackboard* with *Dark Lord*. Maybe it was the undue reference to toads, as if those poetic resources, which produced the inventive genius of *blackboard* with *Dark Lord,* had ran out starkly when it came to expressing the greenness of Potter's eyes. Admittedly, those *were* something you would want to include on a Valentine, to the blunderbus currently cringing on the ground. Maybe, though, the funniest part was Potter's weak attempt to join in everyone else's laughter, despite him clearly wishing he could change his name and purchase a Portkey to Guam. Or maybe it was just the sour look he was leveling over at Draco, as if he was the only one clutching his stomach howling with laughter.

"Did you send this, Draco?" Potter said warningly, only for Peter Weasley to flit between them, trying to make everyone go back to class.

"Off you go, off you go, the bell rang five minutes ago, off to class, now. And you, Malfoy."

"Wait," Potter said, grabbing Draco's arm and shooting daggers, with eyes as green as a fresh-pickled toad. "It was you, wasn't it? You were trying to embarrass me, weren't you? You're always doing this-"

Draco looked over and saw Ginny Weasley watching wide-eyed, looking distressed to have what was obviously her Valentine go over so differently than she must have hoped. If your shy romantic gesture ended in your intended accusing it to be a plot by the Heir of Slytherin, you knew something must have gotten lost in translation.

Draco could have exposed her like last time. Maybe he should have, but the thought of alerting Potter to Girl Weasley's worship and speeding along their true love made him suddenly less amused. And he did not want to think what Ron would think of him for it. "Oh, for Salazar's sake, it wasn't me, Potter. Why would I be wasting a Valentine on *you*, when there's a creature as exquisite and perfect as Cedric Diggory out there existing in the world?"

Potter's face just went redder and hotter. "Cedric Diggory? You really still fancy-"

Peter tried to step between them. "As a school prefect, I must warn against fighting in the corridors..." But he might as well not have existed for all the notice Potter was taking.

"Hey, Harry, come on," Ron said, and with Hermione's help, he managed to steer Potter into Charms with him.

"Seriously, it wasn't me!" Draco called after them, and Ron made a rude enough gesture to, at minimum, indicate some lingering suspicion.

Draco already felt hard done by once dinner arrived, dirty looks coming his way not just from Potter but virtually the entire Gryffindor table, Girl Weasley excluded. *No, come on, girl, stand up and declare your love,* he thought sourly. *He'll reciprocate it eventually*. So it was bad enough, everyone in eyesight either glaring at him or mocking him, for thinking he had sent Potter a joke Valentine. And then every bit of bad karma built up over two timelines came crashing down on him.

"Draco Malfoy?" a gruff, tired voice asked. Even if Draco had wanted to run, there wasn't time, because this dwarf clearly just wanted to get this over with and clock out already. Maybe that was why he couldn't wait and deliver it somewhere less excruciatingly public.

"Attention, attention," the dwarf called, and people were soon giggling and shoving each other, as a hush spread through the Great Hall.

"Theo," Draco whispered frantically, "Theo, you've always been my favorite. If you ever used to be my friend, you will take out that noble wand and cast an Unforgivable on that dwarf," but it was too late. The poor bugger had already burst into song.

And Draco's had *two* verses.

His hair is as pure a blond as his blood,

His eyes are as gray as a inkblot,

People say he's cold, but none of them know

His love for Dark Arts is so hot.

If you speak ill of him, you might lose your tongue,

But I wish he'd use that tongue on me.

He's Slytherin's Heir, but I really don't care,

I wish he would petrify me.

And the dwarf delivered that last line with a macabre little bow, tossing off his wings and grumbling as he trudged off muttering about not getting paid enough for this tripe.

Draco expected laughter, but none of it came. Instead, a few stifled giggles turned to an uneasy hush, as students seemed to process the implications. Maybe there couldn't be amusement when a Valentine also called him the petrifier of his fellow students.

Faced with so much scrutiny, there was no remedy but to head this off at the source. "*Potter*!" Draco snapped, standing up in his seat to glare over at the Gryffindor table. He cupped his hands over his mouth and yelled. "I didn't send you that Valentine, you idiot! You didn't need to *retaliate*! Or was it you, Ron? Are you the one trying to ruin my *life*?"

A soft little shriek came from close to Draco's left. Draco didn't notice it properly until it was followed by a growing wail. "I'm sorry, Draco! I thought you'd like it!" Pansy Parkinson shrieked, and ran out of the Great Hall in hysterics. Millie gave a dirty look in Draco's direction, before leading Daphne and Tracey to follow.

Draco stared after them in baffled incomprehension. "Someone tell that girl that I'm gay!" he bellowed across the Great Hall. "And also, not the Heir of Slytherin!"

After such a declaration, there was really no help for it but to flee as well, though naturally in a different direction than Pansy.

Draco took the steps up to the Owlery two at a time, hands shaking with rage. None the least at the way he would have to humble himself and apologize to Pansy, if he wanted his entire year in Slytherin not to hate him. He threw the Malfoy stationery, custom hunter-green ink, and quill down on the wooden crate he always used to write there, and began to jot in rough furious letters without any forethought,

Dear Father,

STOP TELLING YOUR FRIENDS I AM THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN! You know I am not the one who opened the Chamber of Secrets! But I know you're telling people I am, so everyone I know in Slytherin thinks it's true, because their parents told them that you told them! And you didn't need to make the boys stay over with me at Christmas! Maybe you wanted me to draw them closer to me, but guess what, Father? If I wanted to win them over, I could do it on my own. But as it stands, there is an irreparable divide between me and these prospective friends you must so want me to win back, because they are FALSELY CONVINCED I AM THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN!

I have not lifted a hand to stop you in your plans for the school this year, and believe me, if I wanted to, I could have. But if you do not leave my name out of your bragging, I will do far worse damage to my name than even you have already done, WHEN YOU STARTED FALSELY TELLING PEOPLE I AM THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN!

Draco Malfoy

The real kicker came, though, when Theo tracked him down to the Owlery, and told him he was to go see Severus at once. He didn't find Severus in his office or the Potions classroom, and ended up checking his chambers, which Severus opened at once to his knock, looking apoplectic with rage. "*Draco*," he hissed, the *A* in Draco drawn out for syllables. "Why don't you come *in*?"

Draco had thought he was being summoned for the evening's misadventures, whether the supposed Valentine exchange with Potter, or his unintentional public humiliation of Pansy. But the reason he had been summoned, and summoned *here*, became abundantly clear the minute he entered Severus's chambers. If someone had wanted to liven up their dark aspect, one could hardly deny their success. The sparse dark stone rooms were filled to brimming with golden roses.

"Oh," Draco said with a smirk. "I suppose you'll want my help cleaning these up? Unless you're in a romantic mood and want to enjoy them. They do seem to be high-quality flora. They remind me of the golden roses in the gardens at Malfoy Manor-"

"Do you think yourself amusing?" Severus growled. "Is this your punishment for all those who have spurned your friendship this year? First some insipid rhyme for Potter, and now this private terrorism against your godfather?" He brushed aside Draco's attempts to claim it wasn't him with an impatient gesture. "I knew this a practical joke at once."

He brandished a note on fancy golden stationery, which seemed to have come with all the roses, and thrust it at Draco accusingly. It was printed in elaborate golden calligraphy, regular as if from a charm rather than a hand, which camouflaged the handwriting. Draco had a sneaking suspicion he would recognize it from a certain set of blackboards otherwise.

Dearest Severus,

I hope these roses have helped to brighten up your room as much as the tapestry I gave you for Christmas. You cannot know my sadness that I have not had the chance to visit and admire your newly lively decor, but I hope to have the opportunity soon. I hope for the chance to spend many nights in your rooms in the nights to come. The dungeons can grow cold, but I would be honored to offer myself to warm you up.

If you wish to know my identity, meet me at the Astronomy Tower at midnight. I will be waiting for you, all night if I must. If you do not favor men, I understand, but please come to tell me yourself, lest you break my heart into too many pieces to ever repair. You are the most terrifying and beautiful person I have ever laid eyes upon, and however many may seek my affections, no one will ever, ever, ever do now for me but you.

With love,

Your Secret Admirer

"Did you think I would believe for one second that this note is genuine?" Severus seethed.

"What, do you not fancy men? Mother always told me she thought you were bisexual-" It had been Aunt Bella to say so, actually, but attributing it to Mother was a harmless lie.

"Yes, I am," Severus said through gritted teeth, "Not that I would invite you to take me as some nauseating *queer role model* or any such nonsense. Nor does that mean I would lose all my senses for the illusion of some foolish man taking a shine to the Potions master-"

"So you're not going to go meet your secret admirer tonight? He might be *sad*-"

Severus was looking more and more inclined to disobey the dictates of filial piety and cast Unforgivables on his godson. "I *have* no secret admirer. No one is pining away for love for me, I am certainly intelligent enough to know *that*."

"But Severus-"

"Now silence!" Severus barked. "You will not speak another word until there is not a single rose petal left in my chambers!"

Draco raised a hand as if in class, and with a frustrated sigh, Severus called on him. "Should I start Vanishing them, sir?"

"Of course not," Severus said crisply. "These roses may be of use, and you may yet learn something from your folly. You will assist me in processing them for use as Potions ingredients."

Draco assisted, and allowed Severus to persist in his belief that it had only been a practical joke, if perhaps not by his godson. But if Severus didn't notice how incredibly glum Lockhart looked at the staff table the next day, and how many times he kept yawning, well, some people were just bound and determined not to see what was right before their eyes.

Poor Lockhart. It almost made Draco sorry to know he was soon to have his mind wiped and become a useless vegetable.

Almost. There had been the small incident of him liquefying all of Draco's bones.

It only took a day for Father's letter to come back. It had been a day worth of groveling to the other Slytherins, insisting to Pansy he had genuinely thought it was from Potter and had not just wanted to embarrass her. He also had to put up with the snidest little remarks from Severus, when he made the mistake of going to complain to him about it in his office. As if Severus would have any sympathy about unwanted admirers, after what he thought Draco had put him through.

"It's only natural, Draco," Severus said, without bothering to try and hide his smirk, "For a talented young wizard such as yourself to attract... feminine interest."

And then there was Potter's answer to the charmed note he sent him in the Great Hall at breakfast. To Draco's perfectly reasonable short missive of, *It wasn't me who sent that Valentine. I'm sorry I thought you sent mine,* he received a far more angrily written note flown back which bore the words, *I know it was you, you evil dragon!* and a poorly drawn sketch of a dark-haired boy with glasses strangling a silver dragon with his bare hands.

Draco could put up with a few more false accusations this year, however unjust. If he was to be the scapegoat for everything in this castle now, from petrifications to unwanted romantic gestures, so be it. But he feared a worse reaction from the Gryffindors once Father's reply arrived.

Dear Draco,

As charming as your most recent letter was, I fear you are laboring under a puerile misconception. You are in no danger of being investigated or formally charged as the master of the Chamber of Secrets. Suspicion will soon shift from you to a different recipient, at least in the eyes of the authorities. But the doubt will remain in those families closest to us whether you were the Heir all along, and this will gain you a respect from your fellow Slytherins you will otherwise be sorely lacking, given your ignominious career at Hogwarts before the Chamber opened. It is unsurprising a child would be too short-sighted to understand this, but you must learn to trust my judgment.

You know the legends of the Chamber of Secrets, of its origin and purpose, and these are correct: to rid Hogwarts of those unworthy of the hallowed halls once walked by our ancestor, Salazar Slytherin. You have been taught at school that there is no Chamber, that it does not really exist, and of course that is a lie, though for many centuries it did lie dormant. But the Chamber has been opened before: the first time was fifty years ago, long before my time at Hogwarts, so you need hold no suspicion of me. The student who released the monster was a lover of such creatures, even in the giant spider he unleashed. In time, the spider attacked several students, finally killing one. The person who opened the Chamber was caught by another student and was expelled. But the Headmaster, Professor Dippet, ashamed that such a thing had happened at Hogwarts, forbade anyone to tell the truth. A story was given out that the girl had died in a freak accident. But the monster lived on, and the expelled student remains at Hogwarts to this day as its groundskeeper.

The man who calls you "little dragon" may be some associate of yours, Draco, but you cannot save him from the fate that awaits. He is guilty, and justice will come for him, leaving you unscathed. Burn this letter after you read it, trust your father, and above all, speak to no one of this.

Lucius Abraxas Malfoy

"That's preposterous!" Hermione exclaimed, throwing down the letter. "Hagrid could never have done something like that!"

"I mean, is it?" Ron asked, to everyone's surprise. "Hagrid always has had, you know, um, a bit too much of a liking for monsters, you know? He had Norbert at Hogwarts."

"How could we forget Norbert's darling Mummy?" Draco sniped, and felt worse at the stricken look on Potter's face.

"Hagrid would never do something like that on purpose," Potter said, but that was different from how Hermione had said it.

"I suppose there was also Fluffy," Hermione said, wincing at the memory of the three-headed guard dog. "He always said how harmless he was, but if you didn't know how to approach him... And it's not like we can just assume *Lucius Malfoy* is telling the truth..."

"Yeah, why are we taking this at face value, anyway?" Potter interrupted, sitting up from the bench of the empty Quidditch stands with a start. "I mean, for all we know, Draco's father could have written this knowing Draco would show us, as some definitive proof that his son *isn't* the Heir so we'd-"

"Oh, yes, Potter," Draco drawled, "You've unveiled my father's cunning plot to clear my name, by shifting blame onto the first suspect you lot would readily believe: *Hagrid.*"

"Yeah, Harry," Ron groaned, "Draco would have come up with a better lie..." It seemed even Ron might be reaching a point of fatigue with Harry's Malfoy accusations, perhaps in part because of how transparently fueled it was by suspicion of Draco's Valentine-related activities.

"*Boys.* It doesn't have to even be a lie from Draco's father for Hagrid to be innocent. Headmaster Dippet might have gotten the wrong person. Maybe it was some other monster attacking people..."

"How many monsters d'you think this place can hold?" Ron asked dully.

"My first thought was that the monster was a Basilisk," Draco cut in, trying to at least subtly plant the idea, "But when I told Severus he just laughed it off and dismissed the idea."

"A Basilisk?" Hermione asked, with a spark of interest in her eyes, but Potter was shifting too rapidly between moods for it to take hold.

"We always knew Hagrid had been expelled," said Potter miserably. "And the attacks must've stopped after Hagrid was kicked out. Otherwise, he wouldn't have stayed expelled with his wand broken, would he?"

"He could have been being framed," Draco offered, and wilted under Potter's stare. "What? That's exactly the sort of suggestion I *wouldn't* bring to your attention if *I* was trying to frame him!"

"Or maybe," Potter said slowly, "You're saying that because you *know* we'll think that, and-"

"Knock it," Ron snapped, and then said more tentatively, "You met Hagrid down Knockturn Alley, didn't you?" Draco nodded.

"He was buying a Flesh-Eating Slug Repellent," said Potter quickly.

"Speaking from my experience of Potions masters, Potter," Draco sighed, "You don't exactly have to go to Knockturn Alley just to buy that."

That put all the Gryffindors into a gloomy silence. After a long pause, Hermione said in a hesitant voice: "Do you think we should go and ask Hagrid about it all?"

"That'd be a cheerful visit," said Ron. "Hello, Hagrid, tell us, have you been setting anything mad and hairy loose in the castle lately?"

"If Draco's father is coming after him, we should warn him," Potter protested.

"You mean if he really is guilty?" Hermione asked. "He's not in any danger, unless he's got something to hide."

"You all are so sweet," Draco groaned, giving them his patented Severus-inspired ten second eye-roll. "As if the world works that way." And of course he knew from experience that Hagrid would be suspected and kicked out, but eventually cleared, so it all should add up to Hagrid being innocent. Except Severus had destroyed the diary, and a close watch of Ginny Weasley had showed no suspicious activity whatsoever save an excessive infatuation with Potter. So what if Hagrid *had* been guilty before, and this time it wasn't a Basilisk but a spider, and somehow, Hagrid really was-

"You think it's him, don't you," Hermione said, giving Draco a troubled look.

"I know you'd all rather think it was me," Draco sighed, sagging back against the stands with a bleak look out at the February sunlight. "But I don't know *what's* going on, honestly. I would suspect that diary was involved. It *was* a dark object that entered the castle. I'd think it could still be that, if it was anyone but Severus telling me it had been destroyed. Because an object like that could possess someone. Anyone, me, you, them, even Hagrid. Ginny Weasley, who was given it. Do you want the truth? Yes, it was my father's, alright? I saw it in a case at the Manor once, and I saw him putting it in Girl Weasley's cauldron in Diagon Alley, but I wasn't sure until I saw it in the common room, and then I panicked."

None of them bothered to feign surprise. "Draco," Hermione said, "You should have just told us. I don't get why you didn't-"

"My father," Ron said. "His father. He thought my father would go after his for it. But Draco- if your father is the kind of man to target a *first-year*-"

"I don't-" Draco bit his lip. "I know, but I thought if there was a way I could fix this without ruining my family- it's not just my father I'm thinking of, it's my mother- and she's not a bad mother, she doesn't deserve what would come to her if Father went down-"

"Draco," Hermione said, touching his hand to quiet him. "It's done. Thank you for telling us, even if it's late. But if you really are sure the diary is gone, then we have to start looking at what else could be causing this. And the letter from your father, depending on how much of it we can believe, might be the place to start."

"Thank you for showing it to us," Potter said, reserved, still cautious.

"I won't keep anything from you anymore," Draco said.

Not even Hermione looked like she believed him. And, of course, it wasn't the truth either. But if his tongue had let him, maybe it would have been.

Slytherin played Ravenclaw on a bright sunny day. The *Malfoy Invincible* sign made its return, although it was Vince and not Pansy helping Millie hold it up. Draco tried valiantly not to scan the stands for Potter, failed, and spent more time staring in his direction than the Ravenclaw Seeker's before the match started. Better than at the Ravenclaw section, where Luna Lovegood probably awaited him, blissfully ignorant she still made him jump out of his skin not just at the sight of her, but even the sight of hair almost as bright as hers. Which made catching sight of his own reflection unawares a very fraught pursuit.

But his vision worked perfectly well on the Quidditch pitch. He had won the match the first time around, just barely beating the Ravenclaw Seeker to the Snitch, with a speed he'd had to admit in his heart was entirely due to his superior broom. But it was easier this time around: not because of any sizable improvement on his part, but because he remembered where the Snitch had gone the first time, and that didn't change. The absence of the Rogue Bludger in the Gryffindor game, oddly enough, had been an disadvantage for Draco, in that it had prevented that kind of anticipation. As it was, Draco caught the Snitch almost before the Ravenclaw saw him begin his dive, having camouflaged his movement towards the Hufflepuff stand in a larger general sweep of the perimeter. It was easy to be impressive when just retracing his steps.

What was different was the presence of Potter, who hadn't even bothered to come to Slytherin-Ravenclaw the first time, an absence that had irritated Draco to no end. He'd probably been helping Hermione with research last time, but now he was the only one of the trio to make an appearance. He was seated in that shadowy spot near the wall in a Hufflepuff section of all places, like he was abashed at having attended and didn't want to be seen. Draco couldn't have missed him, even before the Snitch flew down right into Potter's vicinity.

There had been better moments in his life than watching Potter throw himself out of the way as Draco swooped in and wrapped that golden bird right in his palm, while all of Slytherin screamed his name, but it was hard to think of them at the moment.

He pushed his hand with the bird in it triumphantly in the direction of Potter where he had fallen splayed over the benches, blinking stunned with his glasses askew. A rather hollow gesture, given how when they had actually gone up against each other, Potter had been the one to come out on top. But he still couldn't resist showing off, hopping off his broom and standing between the benches to smirk down at him with his precious cargo still in hand. "I didn't give you that awful Valentine, Potter," Draco drawled, "Really. But if you wanted, I *could* give you the Snitch."

He had no idea what nonsense he was spouting, perhaps being caught by the ears of disgruntled Hufflepuffs filing out, but it made Potter stare at him and turn red, so he didn't stop. He grinned and turned the Snitch in his hand, pressing a kiss to the side of the glittering

bird, and couldn't help showboating however much he knew Potter hated it- short-term vs. longterm results, he knew, he tried to remember, but Potter's attention was too addictive.

On an impulse, Draco raised his wand to the Snitch and concentrated. Its material wasn't that different from ones he had transfigured for jewelry before. There were enchantments woven into the very fibers of it, but protections of that sort never seemed to do much against the talon wand. He remembered the display Lockhart had made for Severus, and the gardens at the Manor. Then with an ease he smugly exaggerated, he transfigured the Snitch into a long-stemmed golden rose, each individual petal delicate and distinct.

"There, if you're so convinced you got a Valentine from me. Happy Valentine's Day, Potter."

H for Hermione

Chapter Notes

Playlist

There was nothing Draco could do but wait for the attacks and let the months pass, staring at the date of May 8 in his notebook like a scheduled execution. *Gryffindor-Hufflepuff suspended, Penelope Clearwater and the ugly Mudblood are petrified, Dumbledore kicked out by Father, Hagrid to Azkaban- all eventually reversed.* That was all he had written back when he first arrived in the red line, all that Hermione warranted, nothing but 'the ugly Mudblood' in his hasty scrawl.

It made him uncomfortable staring at it now, thinking with bewilderment on how different he had been back then, and how little he would like that person now if they ever came face to face. But he had resolved not to change any of the writing at the top of the pages from his first recording, to keep it as accurate a memory of the past as possible, so 'the ugly Mudblood' stayed.

Hagrid to Azkaban also created different feelings in him when he'd written it as an afterthought, barely thinking about it at the time, even though he had his own experience of Azkaban. The thought of the cheerful, friendly half-giant surrounded by Dementors now seemed painfully unnatural. He thought absently of ways to try and negotiate to get Father to have Hagrid held somewhere else at least temporarily, all the while harboring suspicions of Hagrid as possibly being behind the Chamber anyway, with the diary out of the picture.

He had two main avenues of investigation, which he pursued doggedly through the months before May 8, without anyone but Dobby really to support them. The first was Hagrid, who Draco set Dobby following without any discernible results. Frustration led Draco by the start of April to return to the destroyed diary as a clue. At least Dobby remembered from it the case, and had enough to tell him about it that Draco regretted not asking sooner.

"Dobby served the Malfoys for many years before the war," Dobby said with a none-too-happy look at the recollection, "But the diary only came to the case in the secret room Dobby cleaned once the war started. And Lucius Malfoy was saying to Dobby what all of the other things in the case were called, like the talon wand, but he never said anything but 'the diary'. And Lucius Malfoy would ask Dobby every year if 'the diary' was still safe."

"Were any of the other artifacts brought to that case during your time?" Draco asked, cautiously putting down his next card. Dobby was quickly coming to better him at this game as well.

"Only Draco Malfoy's wand," Dobby said nervously, "That was the latest. Lucius Malfoy gave it to Dobby to go put in the case, right after the end of the war, but he had Dobby show the way and placed the diary in the case himself- no! No! Bad Dobby! Dobby is speaking secrets- speaking ill of Dobby's family-"

Draco had known to try and hold Dobby back from the stone wall before Dobby even tried to bang his head on it. Some conditioning was hard to break, whatever Hermione said about it. "You don't have a family anymore, remember? Just Hogwarts. And you can say whatever you want about your past to me, because I'm your friend. You're curious about the diary too, aren't you?"

Dobby gave Draco that tentative smile he often did when Draco called him his friend. "Dobby wants to help Draco Malfoy figure out about the Chamber of Secrets so he and Harry Potter will be safe. And Dobby wants to know about the diary if it is important to Lucius Malfoy."

Dobby seemed to steel himself, already looking speculatively towards the wall to punish himself, but was willing to say it anyway. "Dobby would like to be stopping what Lucius Malfoy wants."

Draco squeezed his wrinkled hand, and that was enough to calm him. "I want that too, Dobby," Draco sighed. "More than you know."

"The date on the front of the diary says 1943," Dobby suggested. "Is this meaning something to Draco Malfoy?"

"Fifty years ago," Draco breathed, and then rounded on him. "Dobby, my father said the Chamber was opened by Hagrid fifty years ago. But the diary wasn't Hagrid's. It said T.M. Riddle inside."

"Dobby has seen a T.M. Riddle somewhere," Dobby said regretfully, "But Dobby does not remember."

But the next day, rather than having set up their exploding snap game, Dobby was awaiting Draco at their place in the Slytherin labyrinth practically vibrating with impatient. "Dobby has remembered!" Dobby said excitedly. "Dobby will show Draco Malfoy where Dobby saw the initials and name!"

Draco looked around nervously. "Is it far away? Severus won't be happy if I'm caught out late at night."

Dobby took Draco's arm, snapped his fingers, and in a second they had popped into the trophy room. "Dobby!" Draco hissed, scandalized, pulling away from Dobby to look around nervously. "You're not allowed to Apparate in Hogwarts! You're not supposed to be able to!"

"Elf magic is different, Draco Malfoy," Dobby said patiently.

Well, that would explain how Dobby had helped Potter and co escape from Malfoy Manor. No wonder Draco wasn't making any progress figuring out about the Chamber of Secrets.

There was a reason the hat hadn't put him in Ravenclaw.

"Come and see," Dobby said, excitement returning, and led Draco over to a large plaque with that read *Awarded to T.M. Riddle, For Special Services to Hogwarts, 1943.* A gleaming Hogwarts crest of the four houses shone between the words, after Riddle's name.

"Special services to Hogwarts," Draco read with a frown. "Any idea what those might be?"

"There is no other award like this, Draco Malfoy."

It was a shot in the dark that led Draco to go to Hagrid's the next afternoon, the breezy spring weather making the walk a pleasant one even if he happened to be alone. He had gotten fairly used to that this year, and anything was more social than Azkaban. Thinking of Azkaban in combination with Hagrid as that hut came into view made Draco's stomach churn. But he told himself it wouldn't be for long. Hagrid was so much bigger and hardier than Draco. Just a short time in the prison wouldn't have the effect on Hagrid it had on Draco.

It still made him want to sink into the floorboards with guilt when Hagrid looked up and called out with a bright smile, "Little dragon? Wha' brings yeh all the way out 'ere all by yer lonesome, eh?"

There was nothing for it but to have tea with Hagrid. He seemed happy enough for the company that Draco wondered if seeing Father's letter had curtailed the Gryffindor trio's visits in frequency and friendliness, and felt doubly guilty.

Is this betrayal? Draco wondered. *Sitting here listening to Hagrid ramble on about his cabbages, drinking his tea, eating his concrete-hard cakes, all while knowing in scarcely a month, he'll be in the worst place in the world instead, thanks to my father?* Some of that betrayal felt inevitable, with the knowledge the blue loop had given him, remembered but not shareable. But this felt a particularly heinous betrayal, when the rumors of Draco being the Heir had never changed Hagrid's manner towards him even slightly. There wasn't another person in the world that Draco could say that of, not even Severus or Hermione-

Because it's natural for those rumors to change it. Maybe Hagrid hasn't changed because he's *the Heir of Slytherin.*

"Hey, listen," Draco said cautiously, not quite sure how to approach it, but forced himself to once the tea was done. "Hagrid, you went to school at Hogwarts a long time ago, didn't you? Did you know a student with the initials T.M. Riddle? I think you two were at school at the same time."

Hagrid choked on his remaining tea and cake. "Anapneo!" Draco cast quickly, and soon he was faced with a wide-eyed Hagrid rubbing his throat and staring at Draco like he'd seen a ghost.

"Where'd yeh hear that name?"

Draco winced, took a deep breath, and said, "I think my father had something of his at Malfoy Manor. And I think T.M. Riddle might have something to do with the Chamber of

Secrets."

Hagrid stared at him, for such a long time that Draco began to consider the possibility Hagrid might set some massive spider beast on him. But when his voice finally came croaking out, he sounded more like the one in danger. "What 'as yer father told yeh?"

Draco closed his eyes and took the letter from his father out of his pocket. Hagrid took it with a frown and read it, with a face that went as white as Draco had ever seen him.

Draco was just glad Father wasn't in the habit of dating his letters.

"I didn't think for a second you're guilty," Draco lied, "Or I wouldn't be showing you this letter."

A fat tear ran down Hagrid's face, which he angrily brushed away. "I thought I 'ad left all this behin' me... Merlin, Draco, why is yeh showin' this t' me? Yer father says t' burn it..."

Draco looked away uncomfortably, fearing an outbreak of Gryffindor sentiment. "You don't deserve to go to Azkaban, Hagrid. I don't... I wouldn't want to see you there."

Draco let out a yelp as the table was practically flung aside, and Hagrid enfolded Draco tightly in his arms. Draco let the half-giant hug him, stunned as well as smushed, and looked down in embarrassment when Hagrid let him go, holding him at arm's length to look him up and down.

"I don' know how they can all think yer the Heir o' Slytherin," Hagrid said fiercely, another tear sliding down his face, "When anyone wi' eyes t' see can see yer nothin' a' all like yer father."

"If there's another attack, I think this looks like my father would try and blame it on you. Maybe you should run, Hagrid..."

Hagrid looked worried but still grasping at hope. "Nobody ain' looked a' me so far. An' there ain' bin an attack in months, and Professor Sprout's mandrakes are comin' near ready soon... they bin throwin' these loud parties in Greenhouse Three... keepin' me up a' night..."

"There could be another attack at any time, Hagrid," Draco said, hand stroking at his wand in his pocket for reassurance. "Just anytime at all, there was never any rhyme or reason to when before. And- and there's no being sure that this time, it won't be Hermione."

Hagrid was no longer crying. He was looking at Draco with a pity that under the circumstances Draco found for once he did not resent. "This is all so wrong. Yer a secon'-year, fer Merlin's sake. Yeh shouldn't be havin' to think on anything harder 'n yer electives fer nex' year. Not on whether yer bes' friend's the nex' one to go down."

Draco shrugged weakly. "I mean, if it cheers you up any, I am intending to take Care of Magical Creatures next year." Then he remembered why he had come, and hardened his heart. "Hagrid, I want to help you. But you need to tell me what you know about T.M. Riddle, and what he might have to do with the Chamber of Secrets or my father."

Hagrid wiped his face, and took a deep breath. "Yeh have t' promise me, little dragon. Promise me yeh won' tell 'Arry or none o' them about none o' this. It'd kill me, them knowin' what everyone thought I did. Yeh promise?" Draco nodded, leaving off that he already had. "T.M. will be standin' fer Tom Riddle, then. No other Riddles goin' to school wi' me. He was a Slytherin, though I ain' got a clue what he could be doin' wi' yer father, since he were a Muggleborn." Draco frowned at the thought of a Muggleborn in Slytherin. "S'pose he did hang abou' wi' yer grandfather sometimes... yeh, Tom Riddle was the smartest boy in school. Prefect. Real handsome an' good at classes an' all. An' as far as anyone knew, Riddle's the one who caught the one who opened the Chamber o' Secrets. He thought it was me. See, he didn't wan' t' go back t' the orphanage he lived..."

When Draco left Hagrid's hut more than an hour later, sun nearly set in the sky, he had the simultaneous feeling Hagrid had told him too much, and yet had left out almost everything Draco would needed to know.

He told the name to Dobby, recounting the story with as many details he could remember of spider Hagrid had been raising, no different to Norbert the dragon, with Hagrid's many sentimental recollections over the creature, despite the role it had in his undoing. It was a spider called Aragog that he had been caught with by Tom Riddle, the cleverest boy in school. Riddle had attacked the spider and taken Hagrid at wandpoint to the headmaster. Dippet had agreed with Riddle's judgment, falsely presuming Hagrid to be the owner and monster of the Chamber of Secrets. Riddle had gotten an award for special services to Hogwarts, and Hagrid had gotten expelled. Hagrid had sounded the most sorry, though, even years later, for the spider.

Dobby listened to all this with a frown, and then said words that had Draco's heart racing. "Yes, Dobby remembers a Tom Riddle."

"Tell me!"

"Tom Riddle was coming to visit Abraxas Malfoy many times, when Dobby first began working at Malfoy Manor. He was at school with Abraxas Malfoy. He was the man that Draco Malfoy is describing. He was so handsome that even Dobby would stare at him, but Dobby was scared of his eyes. They were green like Harry Potter's, but they were not nice like his, no, they were cold. And as time went on, there was red in them. Dobby always wondered about him. But then one day, Dobby does not remember when, Tom Riddle stopped coming to Malfoy Manor, and Dobby was never knowing why."

Hagrid had been right. A Muggleborn, friends with Grandfather Abraxas? Who had made Father's views on blood purity look radically liberal? Draco had scarcely ever heard anything more suspicious. Hermione and that lot were definitely missing out not letting Draco into their investigations.

Would it be forgivable to be a Muggleborn if you were one who *killed* Muggleborns? And as a bonus, blamed it on a loner too isolated to clear his name- Hagrid, whose status as a filthy half-breed would make anyone in Abraxas's circle believe Hagrid had deserved what he got?

If that Muggleborn was not fully Muggleborn- if he had opened the Chamber of Secrets, and had Salazar Slytherin's blood in him...

The Malfoys always had loved to talk of being descended from Slytherin, Grandfather Abraxas's portrait most of all. If Tom Riddle had been the Heir of Slytherin, or at least bright enough to pretend to be- and Draco kept hearing how *bright* this Tom Riddle had been...

Yes, Hermione was missing out, but she deserved it for continuing to hang about trying to bring around those uniformed cretins she called friends. So he didn't tell her about what he was learning, and only braved invading the Gryffindors' new library table during Easter holidays, when he heard them discussing electives.

"Don't look at me like that," Draco drawled to Potter, who went red and quiet the moment Draco sat down. "Even the Heir of Slytherin needs to sign up for third-year electives."

"He's right," Hermione said, too stressed to notice his jibe. "It could affect our whole future." She was poring over the lists of new subjects and marking them with ticks.

"I just want to give up Potions," said Potter, and winced at Draco's glare. "What? Your godfather has it in for me and you know it."

"What is wrong with you? Don't you want to be an Auror?" Draco demanded.

Potter blinked. "A what?"

"We can't give up Potions," said Ron gloomily. "We keep all our old subjects, or I'd've ditched Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"But that's very important!" said Hermione, shocked.

"Not the way Lockhart teaches it," said Ron. "I haven't learned anything from him except not to set pixies loose."

"Ronald Weasley!" she said crossly. "You know very well that isn't true."

"Wait," Draco said slowly, looking between all the Gryffindors. "Don't tell me Hermione *still* has a thing for that prancing git." To think that Hermione had grounds to envy *Severus* of all people, and neither of them even knew it. Ron snickered, while Potter made a face. "Merlin, Hermione, when are you going to give up and admit he's a moron?"

"That is exactly the sort of talk," Hermione said primly, "That a dark wizard would use, intent upon dissuading the young from studying ways to defeat him."

"Anyway, you can't ditch Defense, Ron, and we'll have a better professor next year anyway," Draco said, and realized his mistake soon enough to add, "Given that Lockhart will surely be given the sack before the year's out."

Draco got little information out of them then, with all of Hermione's indignant sputtering over Lockhart's honor. He supposed it didn't matter, since he had a good idea of Potter's schedule for third-year, at least. But it would have been nice to feel included.

"I need to be careful about what electives I choose," Draco told Severus over the lamb on Easter Sunday, "Because I'm going to be an Unspeakable, so..."

"Yes, yes," Severus said absently, "Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Divination. *Obviously.*"

Draco blinked rapidly. "Who says I'll be taking the maximum three electives?"

"How many will be Miss Granger be taking?" Severus asked silkily.

Draco glanced down the table and felt a pang, watching her wave her fork angrily at Ron. "I don't know," he muttered, and pulled back out the list. "Obviously Muggle Studies is out for *me*, if I don't want my father to feed the Muggle Studies professor to a giant snake."

He only realized how on-the-nose he had been about Professor Burbage's fate when Severus looked at him bemusedly. "Why, Draco, what an evocative image. Should your godfather be disturbed by the contents of your... *fantasy* life?"

"But what about Care of Magical Creatures?" Draco pressed. He didn't want to admit to Severus that he'd already told Hagrid he was taking it. Then again, not taking Hagrid's class would be a great way to avoid all Hippogriffs entirely. "Won't I need that?"

"If you intend to join the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures," Severus said rather cuttingly. "But I had assumed you aimed *higher.* You will likely use Arithmancy regularly if you become an Unspeakable, runes no less regularly, and of course Unspeakables are too concerned as a department with the future and the gathering of prophecies for you not to take Divination. *That* should be the first on your list." He peered at Draco doubtfully when Draco was silent and sullen. "Are your little Gryffindors taking the other class, then?"

They were, and it would mean he would see them even less next year, but Draco had actually been thinking of Hagrid's disappointment. If Draco was going to stand by and let the man get sent to Azkaban, the least he could do was take his class next year, and try and keep the other Slytherins from messing it up. "I don't know," Draco lied. "But I like magical creatures."

Severus snorted. "How long have I known you, vain boy? You like dragons and snakes, narcissistically. Perhaps some other reptiles by association. But the only other magical creatures you *like* are the ones you can wear as a pelt."

Longbottom willingly spoke to Draco for the first time since Halloween, when he waylaid him for advice about what classes to take. Draco knew Longbottom ended up in Care of Magical Creatures, but hadn't the faintest idea what else. "Muggle Studies for one, Longbottom, I reckon you'd enjoy that," he said, thinking of the less obvious choices.

He looked up to find Longbottom staring incredulously. "You're recommending I take Muggle Studies? *You*?"

"Why not?" Draco said defensively. "*I'm* not taking it, just saying I think you should. It would be easier than the other courses. Take that and Care of Magical Creatures, Longbottom. Those would be easiest for you. Thank me later when you don't flunk out of Hogwarts and end up working on the Knight Bus."

Draco could only smile to himself when he overheard Longbottom, telling the other Gryffindors later, that he'd decided on Muggle Studies and Care of Magical Creatures. "Aw, Neville, you don't want to do Divination with us?" Ron started whining.

"I don't want to flunk out of Hogwarts," Longbottom told them wide-eyed, "And end up working on the Knight Bus."

Draco's letter to Mother, asking her to send any family books or papers mentioning or written by his grandfather, got him nowhere. She sent a great pile of them, but they bore an almost suspicious void of references, even in private papers, to Abraxas's supposed school friend. All that poring over them gave him was aches in his eyes and head, even with Dobby's assistance at the task.

At least, he told Dobby, he was teaching the elf basic research skills. "Just think, Dobby," Draco would tell him wearily. "You'll be better at researching than Hermione soon. Wouldn't she just love that?"

On the night of May 7, Draco went to Hagrid's hut just before nightfall, carrying a package. He was no closer than ever to figuring any mysteries out, and was beginning to suspect he could investigate for years on end and get nowhere. Tomorrow was the day that Hermione would be petrified and Hagrid would go to Azkaban- and Peter Weasley's girlfriend would be petrified as well, but Draco didn't care about *her. Y*et the world was going on as always, with no sign in anyone's movements or faces of any presentiment of confrontation tomorrow between future and past, between blue and red. No one but Draco knew the test that awaited him, and what it would cost if he failed.

Hagrid opened the door no less happy to see him than ever, madman that he was, and took the package Draco offered him. "I can't stay," Draco said. He really couldn't, with all the notebooks he had to reread as a last-ditch effort that night to see if there was anything he'd overlooked in his old research that could help. He almost wished he could. "But I have something for you. I've just been thinking, we don't know what's going to happen. My father could come after you anytime. There wouldn't even have to be an attack. So I want you to have this. Because maybe you could take it with you, to... yeah."

"Thank yeh, Draco," Hagrid said with a bemused nod, and ripped the green and silver wrapping paper open, in one strong rip, to reveal the twin red horns of Imoogi the dragon.

"This is Imoogi," Draco said, feeling almost ready to die of embarrassment, but at least he wasn't staying. "She's, er, a dragon. She's been mine since she was little." Hagrid was looking down over her red and green snake-like body and sharp flares of her spine, probably wondering what species she was meant to be. "She's Korean. Imoogi is, um, from a Korean legend, which I don't have time to tell you, so that's why I wrote it down for you in the envelope." Hagrid lifted up the envelope which he had ripped open along with the package, wincing guiltily.

"Reparo," Draco said quickly, fixing the letter in one swipe of his wand, and babbled on. "And I know it's probably stupid and you won't want her, but if the worst happens- if you do go to Azkaban- I know you like dragons. Real ones, not toys, but..." He was losing his thread. "Azkaban- I've heard it's an awful place. That it changes you. The Dementors. And it's lonely.

And so- I've had Imoogi here at Hogwarts, and a lot of the time she was the only friend I had, which I know is the most stupid pathetic thing ever, but it made me feel better, and just- if you could bring her along, maybe it wouldn't be so lonely?"

For the second time, Hagrid enfolded Draco in a firm hug, telling him, "Thank yeh, she's a beautiful un', come by an' visit 'er whenever yeh like." He sent him merrily away with, "Go on then, little dragon, back to yer studies, this lady'll keep me company."

But Draco's notebooks told him nothing new.

Still, when he woke the morning of May 8, he had one ace in the hole, though he'd hoped it wouldn't be necessary: the Avenseguim placed on the most recent turquoise charm he'd given for Christmas, H for Hermione.

A nervous Potter came skulking up to him after breakfast, like he invariably did the morning of his matches. He asked Draco if he would be coming, while trying desperately to act like he didn't care either way.

"I don't know, Potter," Draco said distractedly. He felt at his wand in his pocket, which he had spent a great deal of time charming it, to whisper to him the part of the castle Hermione was currently in when he stroked it twice a certain way, as well as magically directing him on a path towards her when he spoke the incantation. He'd tested it once or twice, and it had led straight to her. "Depends on how I'm feeling at the time."

Potter turned and walked away, and Draco stroked his wand twice. "Great Hall," the wand told him in the eerie low female voice it used, which he told himself had nothing in common with Aunt Bella's. He looked up and there was Granger, standing not 15 meters away talking to Ron and Potter. He heard her telling Ron she'd accompany him to the game, of course she would, but Draco wouldn't have needed her to tell him that.

"Avenseguim," Draco whispered. The wand gave a physical pull in the air towards where Hermione stood. She could not feel it in return. She passed out of his range of sight soon enough, but he could feel it tugging still, leading outside towards the Quidditch stands.

Draco went with the other second-year Slytherins to the match in perfect contentment, grateful to catch the bright flash of orange of Ron's hair from the Gryffindor stands, in just the direction the pull was coming from. He stroked his wand twice to make sure. The voice telling him *Gryffindor stands* made his heart calm down. He didn't remember exactly when she'd been petrified the first time around, but it couldn't happen around this many people. She was safe.

Except when he looked over again, there was no sign of her bushy brown hair next to Ron.

Draco followed the pull of his wand, shoving all and sundry out of his way, wishing he had Blaise beside him going, "Make way for the Heir of Slytherin!" But there was no need to panic yet. The tracking charm said she was here. He probably just couldn't see her behind Seamus Finnigan's fat head.

The usual protest that would have greeted a Slytherin forcing his way into the Gryffindor stands was muted by Draco's reputation. The only ones who dared be indignant were Ron and his friends as he accosted them. "Oi, Draco, you can't be here!" Ron protested.

"Where is she?" Draco asked frantically, looking around as he started to hear his heartbeat in his ears. He stroked the wand and heard it murmur *Gryffindor stands.* A horrible thought hit him: it wasn't tracking her but the charm on the bracelet. "Is her bag here?" Ron shook his head, and Draco went through every bag in the vicinity, dumping them on the floor of the stand to no avail. There was no glimmer of crystal and African turquoise.

"Fuck!" Draco exclaimed, tears threatening to spring to his eyes. Even the sight of the bracelet would have explained it, but no... He stroked his wand and heard it say *Gryffindor stands* in the same exact voice. "Where is Hermione?"

"She went to the library," Ron told him, looking baffled. "She said she'd just figured out something. What, did she say something to-"

Draco shoved through the Gryffindors on his way to the stairs down out of the stands. "Dobby," he hissed to the thin air, "Dobby, can you hear me? I need you now, Dobby, I need you to Apparate me," but unlike in the Manor, the elf wouldn't just magically appear when called. Draco began to sprint across the grass, the wand still murmuring *Gryffindor stands* every time he touched it, the pull on it still tugging backwards towards the Quidditch pitch.

He was running so fast he ran right into a pale-faced, distraught-looking McGonagall, who was coming out of the castle at a fast pace of her. "Professor!" Draco exclaimed. "Professor, I'm sorry, what's going on-"

"Draco," she began, in a voice like it was difficult even to say his name, and before she said anything else, he knew.

He pushed past and kept running.

He made it to the hospital wing in record time, taking the stairs two at once, cursing at his wand in English and French with the worst words he knew, though it was probably his own damn mistake, trusting Hermione's fondness for the bracelet he gave her. The charm must have fallen off and lodged there sometime. It was nothing and no one's fault but Draco's that Hermione would be as rigid as the turquoise stone when he found her, if he was *lucky*...

There was a sixth-year Ravenclaw with long curly hair there, Peter Weasley's girlfriend, as stiff a statue as Creevey had been. Draco prayed against every ounce of reason in him that the figure that Madam Pomfrey was bending over on the bed beside the Ravenclaw was anyone but Hermione...

It was Hermione, with her big brown eyes as wide as they were empty, staring out into nothingness. One arm was outstretched before her, the turquoise bracelet still hanging off her wrist.

Madam Pomfrey saw him staring, and somehow was kind enough to register him not as a possible perpetrator, but as a friend of Hermione's. "She's not dead," she told him. "Just

petrified like the others." Then she went out into the hall, saying she had to consult with McGonagall.

Draco stepped towards Hermione as if in a dream, while Madam Pomfrey turned to check the vital signs of the Ravenclaw. Draco picked up Hermione's bracelet, turning it on her wrist, and there, between the Kali and Medusa charms, hung the H.

He traced other hand over his wand, and it told him, *Gryffindor stands.*

"Get away from her!"

He turned to find Harry Potter pointing his wand at him. Ron was by his side, frozen transfixed at the sight of Hermione. But Ron's horror hadn't slowed Potter down. His wand jabbed into Draco's chest, making sure Draco wouldn't draw his own. "I said, get away from her!"

Draco staggered back and Potter pursued him, wand fixed on him with Avada Kedavra eyes never more ready to live up to their color. "Ron said you left, wanting to know where Hermione was! Didn't he?" Ron nodded, ashen. "Ron, go get Professor McGonagall! Hands out of your pockets!" Draco pulled them out and raised them, staggering, while Ron ran like Hermione's life depended on it.

"You did this!" Potter gasped in Draco's face, backing him up until Draco's back hit the wall of the hospital wing. Potter was a bright crimson brand of righteousness in the stark neutral of the hospital bay, a wound across sterile white. "You left the match and went after her! You did this to her, to *Hermione*, how could you, Draco, how could you-"

Draco began to cry.

It was the last thing he wanted, but once he started, he couldn't stop. "I'm sorry," he gasped, tears starting to run down his face like raindrops in a thunderstorm. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's my fault, I'm sorry..."

Potter looked mystified. "Why are you crying?"

"I was trying to stop it, I couldn't stop it," Draco sobbed, "I couldn't figure it out, I couldn't save her, I couldn't change anything... I wanted to save her... I'm so useless, I can't do anything right... I don't understand anything... I wanted to save her..."

And then Potter's wand had gone back to his pocket, and Potter's arms wrapped around Draco as he embraced him for the very first time.

He smelled like Quidditch, grass and wood and nervous sweat. He pulled Draco's sobbing face against his shoulder. Draco felt his tears course down into the Gryffindor red, sticking his face to the wet fabric with the narrow sharpness of Potter's shoulder beneath it jabbing into his face. He closed his eyes and tried to stop crying and just sobbed harder. Potter's arms stayed linked around his neck. One of Potter's hands ran through Draco's hair, and pressed his face harder against Potter's shoulder, as if giving him permission to keep crying there.

"It's okay, Draco," Potter kept saying, voice impossibly gentle. "It's okay, she's only petrified, she's not dead... the mandrakes will be ready soon, she'll be alright, she's not dead..."

Draco's hands went to Potter's waist, clinging there desperately. Potter didn't stop him. His hand began to stroke the back of Draco's head, without any of the awkwardness that Draco would have expected in a more lucid moment, only the soft brush of Potter's fingers through his hair. "She's going to be fine, Draco, I promise, don't cry, she's not dead..."

"Harry," Ron said from nearby. He made a soft sound of surprise, losing whatever he had been about to say, at the sight of Draco collapsed in Potter's arms.

McGonagall followed, and her presence made Potter extricate himself from Draco, though he kept a hand on his shoulder to ensure he stayed up.

"They were found near the library," said McGonagall. "I don't suppose any of you can explain this? It was on the floor next to them..." She was holding up a small, circular mirror, and if there was one thing Draco hated in this world or any other, it was mirrors.

Harry and Ron shook their heads. After a moment, Draco realized they were waiting for him. "No," Draco said, voice breaking embarrassingly as he tried to straighten up and wipe his face. "No, I don't, I'm sorry."

"I will escort you back to Gryffindor Tower," said Professor McGonagall heavily. "I need to address the students in any case." She turned to Draco, and lay a hand on his shoulder as well. "Mr. Malfoy, chin up. Miss Granger is only petrified. We will have her back again, I promise. I will send for your Head of House to escort you back as well." She began to walk off, only to stop when Ron and Potter didn't immediately follow. "Gentlemen?"

Ron was taking Draco by the shoulders then, like all these Gryffindors were doing, as if anything could be fixed by touch. "Bloody hell, Draco, are you alright?"

"He's not the Heir of Slytherin," Potter said, and before the two of them left to follow McGonagall, gave Draco a nod goodbye.

Aragog

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Thanks so much for all your thoughts and comments! It's been a lot of fun :)

As for the question of the tracking spell, Draco did not mess up, and Hermione was wearing the bracelet throughout, including the H charm he specifically used it on. For some reason, though, the talon wand didn't work... Make of that what you will. (It's a mystery...)

I would definitely love to do one-shots of alternative POVs for characters other than Draco sometime, though right now, I'm very invested in the main story- Prisoner of Azkaban is my favorite of the books, and I'm super super excited for it <3 But someday I hope to do alternate POVs, yes! ^^

Anyway, please enjoy! :)

"All students will return to their house common rooms by six o'clock in the evening. No student is to leave the dormitories after that time. You will be escorted to each lesson by a teacher. No student is to use the bathroom unaccompanied by a teacher. All further Quidditch training and matches are to be postponed. There will be no more evening activities."

Severus finished reading from the parchment and rolled it up in silence. There were murmurs all around, with Slytherins shoving each other and looking around, mainly at Draco.

"Are there any questions?" Severus asked icily, as unflappable as ever.

"Can we visit the hospital wing?" Draco asked anxiously, and ignored the looks of annoyance and disgust he'd earned. It wasn't like they hadn't already seen his tear-swollen face.

"No," Severus said flatly, turning to go, before one of the seventh-years called out to him.

"Professor, why are *we* on lockdown? No one's going to go after us. They've been after all the other houses, but not Slytherin. We're all safe, because no one here is a Mudblood like-"

"Shut your mouth!" Draco yelled before he knew what he was doing. And in an instant, a seventh-year whose name Draco didn't know had Draco's wand to his throat.

A moment later, Severus's hand was on his arm, lowering it. "Children. *Enough*."

The seventh-year looked furious at Severus for not punishing Draco, but scared enough of Draco, as he ran back towards his dorms, that Draco had to count that as a solitary win.

"The first person who says something to me," Draco told his fellow second-years, "Will not have their tongue stuck to the roof of their mouth, but *removed.* And I'll warn you, I am *skillful* with several cutting spells and curses, but not exactly *precise.*"

There was a long silence, and then Theo returned with a notebook, and wrote, *Granger was attacked, wasn't she*?

"Yes," Draco said tightly, and sat down on his bed with a thud and put his head in his hands.

"It really isn't you, is it? The Heir," Blaise said, sounding disappointed, but laughed at the look on Draco's face after he sat down beside him. "Oh, come on, Draco, you know you aren't going to curse me for saying you were *right*."

Visitors were indeed barred from the hospital wing. Draco found that out facing off with an implacable Madam Pomfrey. She sent him away, and he was left, trying to convince himself, that if he used the Imperius curse within the walls of Hogwarts, he was far too likely to be caught.

And besides, he thought as he stomped away with gritted teeth, could he even trust his wand to do it properly? He was wary after what had happened with the tracking charm. He hadn't ever forgotten whose wand it initially was. But he had come to trust it nonetheless, the way he had his unicorn hair wand, like an extension of his right arm.

The more he read on tracking charms, the more he realized how fickle they could be, and the more things he found that he might have done wrong himself. It had probably been his own mistake. And it wasn't like any other wands worked for him anyway.

Hogwarts was a pasture full of sheep, waiting for their shepherd to lead them to slaughter.

No one hopped out of Draco's way in the corridors anymore, and no one cast worried glances at him in the Great Hall, like they expected him to unleash monsters from the pitchers of pumpkin juice. He did get stares, but they were mainly ones that looked concerned and yes, pitying.

Draco didn't curse any of the people who looked at him that way. What was the point?

He found some hope, though, in his immediate return to Ron and Potter's confidence, and the wild story they gave him of the scene they'd witnessed under the invisibility cloak at Hagrid's hut. They didn't even seem to blame him, when they mentioned his father's role in arresting Hagrid and banishing Dumbledore. Instead, they just seemed to be mortified by their mistake suspecting Draco, and wishing fruitlessly that they could take it back.

"We should have listened to you," had become Ron's mantra, along with "I'm sorry I was a bad friend," and most importantly, "I understand if you'll never forgive us, but if we don't work together now, Hermione might not..."

"Oh, I never *will* forgive you, get that part clear. But I'll help about the Chamber, for Hermione's sake. You do need *one* brain to guide you about with Hermione gone," Draco

drawled the first time, and got neither annoyance nor laughs, only rueful smiles. They both had the grace not to mention the breakdown he'd had in the hospital wing, either.

Nothing could have welded them back together quicker, whatever fissures still lay underneath, than the loss of the girl who had brought them together in the first place. Draco would have gone crawling back to *Voldemort* to get her back safe.

And as with the midnight duel last year, Draco had another apology letter from Potter to add to his collection.

Dear Draco,

I'm sorry I suspected you as the Heir of Slytherin. I should have listened to you. Maybe if I had, Hermione wouldn't have been attacked. And that's on Ron and I, but mostly, that's on me. I was always more convinced than him, so if you have to blame one of us, blame me.

I understand why you were never willing to call me a friend. I didn't deserve it. If we're never friends now, I'll understand. You didn't deserve for us to doubt you after everything you've done for us. You were willing to give your life to save Ron's last year, even though your family calls him a blood traitor. I should have known you don't believe the things that they believe.

And I shouldn't have expected you to turn on your family for us. I don't want you to lose your family. I don't want you to be alone. I know you've been alone all this year, and it makes me sick thinking of you trying so hard to protect Hermione without our help, and we just thought you wanted to hurt her.

I don't know why I kept thinking you were guilty. It seems so obvious now it wasn't you. I just always feel so off-balance around you, like I can't trust myself. My brain doesn't work. I never know what I think about you. I'm sorry I'm such an idiot about you all the time. Everyone acts like I'm some kind of hero because I'm the Boy Who Lived, but you're the only one I've ever really wanted to think I'm a hero.

And I can never impress you, at all, and all I ever do is mess up around you and doubt you because I doubt myself, and I still can't work it all out in my head.

I guess I just find you really, really intimidating. In every way. It's no excuse, I know, but I just want you to understand. You're an incredible person, and maybe we can never be friends now, but I hope we can work together at least until all this with the Heir of Slytherin is over, for Hermione's sake.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

Information began to flow freely between them, as Potter told him the last words Dumbledore had said and asked if Draco could make any sense of them. "'I will only truly have left this school when none here are loyal to me,'" Potter recited. It sounded, Draco thought dryly, rather like a rallying cry for Dumbledore's Army. "'Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it.' What do you think he meant?"

"I don't know," said Draco. "That he expects you two to carry out his will here once he's gone? And maybe that there's another person here on his side who'll help you..."

Draco wondered briefly if that could be Severus, knowing of his secret loyalties, but Draco highly doubted that was how the blue loop had gone. Not that he knew. He would have been so much more useful right now if he had been friends with the Gryffindors the first time, instead of just celebrating Hermione's petrification with bad jokes to Vince and Greg.

At least Hagrid had the grace not to be mysterious, and had apparently told the Gryffindors to *follow the spiders*. Given that Ron's Boggart in third year had supposedly been a giant spider, he couldn't be thrilled about that idea, but he seemed to embrace the task determinedly enough.

Maybe Ron's Boggart was a giant spider *because* of something that they were about to find. Draco considered giving the tracking charm another shot, with nothing to lose at this point. But neither he, nor Potter or Ron in the brief times they could catch a moment to talk, said they were seeing any spiders. "Don't you think that's suspicious in itself?" Draco hissed. "What, has Dumbledore's departure inspired a dangerous rash of secret spider parties?"

But all too soon Ron and Potter had to go away in a knot of Gryffindors, and Draco in a knot of Slytherins. For a few bizarre moments, Draco actually found himself wishing he'd asked the hat to sort him Gryffindor. If that had ever really been a possibility.

It was very hard to meet now that Ron and Potter actually wanted to. There was no time to talk about the Chamber and helping Hermione, let anything more fraught and emotional between them. They had to communicate mainly by notes, since they were expected to move about the castle in clumps grouped by house. Sometimes the notes Draco sent were only glorified complaints about how bored he was. It was devilishly hard to meet with Dobby, too, which just made Draco lonelier. He missed Imoogi to dictate to him. He would take out Potter's two apology letters and read them to himself alone, when he would get too lonely. The only two times he managed to sneak away on his own outside the Slytherin dungeons were when he asked Dobby to look for spiders too, and then the second meeting, when Dobby informed him he couldn't find a single one in the castle.

He had to admit he had pretty much given up hope completely by the time Potter's pretty white snowy owl swooped down at dinner at the Slytherin table to a world of stares, dropping a letter that told him where the spiders were going.

Draco spent a very frightening few minutes hiding in the shadows of the Entrance Hall, trying not to be noticed, before Potter and Ron made their appearance and collected him under the invisibility cloak. "Where have you been?" he hissed. "*I* wasn't invisible!"

"Fred and George kept wanting to play exploding snap," Ron explained, only to cry out.

"Ron? What's wrong! Did something bite you!" Potter gasped on high alert.

"No," Draco drawled, "I just stomped on his foot."

Ron whined until he got scared, and then he was quizzing Draco about whether there were werewolves in the Forbidden Forest. *Not till next year, Ron.* "Don't worry," Draco lied, "I know a charm to drive off werewolves."

"'Course," said Ron abruptly, as they strode across the black grass, "We might get to the Forest and find there's nothing to follow. Those spiders might not've been going there at all. I know it looked like they were moving in that sort of general direction, but..." His voice tailed away hopefully, and Draco stamped on his foot again. "Ow! What was that for?"

"This lead had better turn out," Draco hissed, "Because we're all out of other ideas, so Salazar help me, if you even think of trying to wimp out of this, Ron, I will personally find the biggest giant spider on the planet and feed you to it myself!"

They reached Hagrid's house, which had the eerie pathetic look of the shell of a building half-burnt down. When Potter pushed the door open, Fang was so excited to see him he made a prodigious racket. Draco watched Ron and Potter like they had gone mad as they hastily fed Fang treacle fudge from a tin on the mantelpiece, until he realized it glued Fang's teeth together.

Just another thing Draco had missed, he supposed, in his year out in the cold.

Potter left the Invisibility Cloak on Hagrid's table. He said there would be no need for it in the pitch-dark Forest, though Draco complained they should carry it anyway. He was outvoted.

"C'mon, Fang, we're going for a walk," said Potter, patting his leg, and Fang bounded happily out of the house behind them, dashed to the edge of the Forest and lifted his leg against a large sycamore tree.

Potter took out his wand, murmured, "Lumos!" and just enough light appeared to let them watch the path for signs of spiders. Ron followed suit, as did Draco, although Draco's attempt flared up as bright as a Lumos maxima before he could concentrate and make it shrink.

"I didn't mean to," Draco muttered, as Potter and Ron turned back around squinting in pain. "You don't know how hard it is with this bloody wand not to just explode everything in my path-"

Potter saved Draco from accidentally saying too much as he tapped them both on the shoulder, pointing at the grass. Two solitary spiders were hurrying away from the wandlight into the shade of the trees, and Draco would have been so much more scared if he was not proceeding on the presumption that like the trip to the Forbidden Forest in first year, Ron and Potter had made pretty much the same trip as this in the course of the blue loop and survived it.

"Okay," Ron sighed, with a nervous look at Draco when he let the reluctance show in his voice. "No, really, it's okay. I'm ready. Let's go."

So, with Fang scampering around them, sniffing tree roots and leaves, they entered the Forest. By the glow of their wands, they followed the steady trickle of spiders moving along the path. They walked for about twenty minutes, not speaking, listening hard for noises other than breaking twigs and rustling leaves. Then, when the trees had become thicker than ever, so that the stars overhead were no longer visible, and their wands shone alone in the sea of dark, they saw their spider guides leaving the path.

Draco looked to Potter for a cue how to proceed- he was the hero here- but he seemed unsure. Then he had jumped backwards and, much to Ron's displeasure, he was the one to stomp on Ron's foot now. "Sorry!" Potter gasped, "I think it was just Fang's nose."

"Next you'll be taking your cue from Longbottom," Draco drawled, "And shooting your wand off at *scary trees*."

"I'm not being a coward!" Potter protested, mortified. "It was just a mistake-"

"Harry," Ron said wearily, "Draco, come on, we've come this far, haven't we? We might as well see it through, if you can stop arguing long enough to look for the spiders."

So they followed the darting shadows of the spiders into the trees, and this was beginning to feel disconcertingly close to manual labor to Draco, as he nearly tripped over tree roots and stumps. Draco had never imagined being heroic involved so much *outdoors* work.

"Did I really *have* to come along with you two blunderbusses for this?" Draco hissed to Potter. "Surely even your feeble minds could have handled-"

"You don't have to-"

"Shut up, you two!" Ron groused. "Now I know how Hermione feels."

The name sounding in the pitch black air was a reminder that sent a shiver through Draco.

They walked for long enough that even Draco's Quidditch-trained legs began to ache, and it was only the fear of Potter losing the trail of spiders that kept him from complaining. Even when his expensive robes tore on a low-hanging branch, and the looks Potter and Ron gave him at his indignant shriek were cruelly unsympathetic. Finally, Ron indicated with a gesture that they were moving downhill.

Then Fang suddenly let loose a great, echoing bark, making them all jump like they'd had Tarantallegra cast on him. "What?" said Ron loudly, gripping onto Potter so hard Draco would have laughed at him, if he hadn't happened to be doing the same to Potter's other arm.

"There's something moving over there," Potter breathed. "Listen... sounds like something big."

They listened. Some distance to their right, the something big was snapping branches as it carved a path through the trees.

"Oh no," said Ron. "Oh no, oh no, oh-"

"Shut up," said Potter frantically. "It'll hear you."

"Hear me?" said Ron in an unnaturally high voice. "It's already heard Fang!"

Draco considered. "If you want, Potter, I could cast Langlock on Ron."

"What d'you think it's doing?" said Potter.

Draco bet it was a giant spider.

"Probably getting ready to pounce," said Ron.

They waited, shivering, and Draco felt smug at being the least scared one, even though he had foreknowledge he thought meant he could presume their safety. If he didn't mess things up, that was, him and all of his dark curses.

"D'you think it's gone?" Potter whispered.

"I doubt it, Potter."

They waited and waited, and Draco's hand tightened on his wand, as the sound came closer.

Draco only saw Ron's face contort in terror before he was swept up into the air and set hanging there. He looked over, and the same had happened to Ron and Potter, and he told himself everything was still fine, he still had his wand, until he began to realize how *hairy* the limbs that held him were. Fang's yowling became fainter as the three of them were pulled through the trees, and Draco closed his eyes, trying to decide whether he should cast a curse, if this was what had happened before, or if he had just messed everything up by being there and this was the end of Harry Potter.

Draco told himself it was Slytherin calculation rather than cowardice that kept him from trying to fight. After all, he still had his wand, and as long as that was true, best to hold tight and wait to see how this turned out. Maybe the spiders were friendly, if overzealous. Hagrid wouldn't have sent them here unless it was safe, he told himself, unless Hagrid was evil, in which case Draco was very cross to have given him Imoogi.

Yes, it was a spider carrying them, and Draco felt his vision begin to dim as he was tossed to and fro in the darkness. He pulled his wand to his chest and held it there to keep it safe, and felt the crude rocking motion almost lull him to sleep, over the sound of Fang's panicked roars...

And then his half-sleep was broken by moonlight, as they reached some sort of break in the trees that looked artificially cleared. That made it all too easy to see what the moonlight revealed: that perhaps Draco had not been right to be so sarcastic in forecasting a spider party after all.

At the very least, this had to count as some kind of spider *convention*.

Why had the Dark Lord never tried to get these beasts to fight for him? Draco would have liked to see the defenders of Hogwarts trying to do battle with these Hippogriff-sized aberrations of nature with their eight eyes and eight legs and infinite capacity to terrify Ron Weasley. He smiled to himself, somewhere between trust in the blue loop and serene acceptance of his own impending death, as he imagined Dobby leading an army of house elves out of the kitchens to do battle with the convention of spiders.

There was a web at the center of the hollow, towards which they all seemed to be being carried. That was not very encouraging.

Draco remembered how the Devil's Snare under the trapdoor had trapped his wand hand, and made it useless even with his wand out and drawn. Best not to let that happen again.

These deranged furry beasts seemed excited by their quarry, clicking their pincers like their leader had brought them back a tasty meal. Draco wondered if Ron and Potter would prefer being mercy-killed by Draco, rather than being eaten alive by spiders. And then his face hit the ground as the spider let him go, the others falling beside him. Draco fell with the talon wand pressed right to his chest, but when he rolled over, he was glad to see it undamaged.

Funny, how the talon actually looked a bit like the spiders' pincers, in the right angle of the moonlight.

Fang wasn't howling any more, but cowering silently on the spot. Ron's mouth was similarly stretched wide in a kind of silent scream, with those big light eyes ready to pop out of their sockets. Potter, though, was looking around them already with an alert intelligence, and his gaze was what drew Draco's attention to the beast calling out, "Aragog! Aragog!"

"Oh," Draco sighed, and let his head fall happily to the grass below him, as he began to laugh. "Don't worry, it's *Hagrid's* giant spider."

Potter and Ron didn't seem to hear him, spellbound as from the middle of the misty domed web, a spider the size of a small elephant emerged, very slowly. There was grey in the black of his body and legs, and each of the eyes on his ugly, pincered head was milky white. He was blind.

"What is it?" he said, clicking his pincers rapidly.

"Men," clicked the spider who had caught Potter.

"Is it Hagrid?" said Aragog, moving closer, his eight milky eyes wandering vaguely.

"Strangers," clicked the spider who had brought Ron.

"Kill them," clicked Aragog fretfully. "I was sleeping..."

"We're friends of Hagrid's," Potter shouted, and his bravery made Draco braver.

"Yeah, he told us about you!" Draco called out. "*Aragog*! He said you were a nice spider!"

It wasn't even a lie.

Though from the looks Ron and Potter turned to give him in the moonlight, it looked like they rather suspected it to be one.

Click, click, click went the pincers of the spiders all around the hollow.

Aragog paused. "Hagrid has never sent men into our hollow before," he said slowly.

"He told me about you!" Draco called. "About what happened! Fifty years ago! With the Chamber of Secrets!"

"Hagrid couldn't have told *us* that?" Ron quietly grumbled.

"Hagrid's in trouble," said Potter, cutting right to the heart of it. "That's why we've come."

"In trouble?" said the aged spider, and Harry thought he heard concern beneath the clicking pincers. "But why has he sent you?"

Draco couldn't believe how calm and almost commanding Potter seemed, even through his obvious fear, looking up at that insane beast, green eyes almost iridescent in the moonlight.

"They think, up at the school, that Hagrid's been setting a- a- something on students. They've taken him to Azkaban."

"Azkaban is awful! Would not recommend!" Draco called out helpfully, before a glare from Ron and Potter made him shut his mouth.

Aragog clicked his pincers furiously, and all around the hollow the sound was echoed by the crowd of spiders, like applause. Draco liked to think it was for his excellent judgment of Azkaban.

"But that was years ago," said Aragog fretfully. "Years and years ago. I remember it well. That's why they made him leave the school. They believed that I was the monster that dwells in what they call the Chamber of Secrets. They thought that Hagrid had opened the Chamber and set me free."

"Did you know about this?" Ron hissed at Draco, who nodded. "Why did he tell you and not us?"

"I don't know," Draco whispered back. "Because I asked?"

"And you... you didn't come from the Chamber of Secrets?" Potter stammered, perhaps not so calm now. Overall, though, Potter was doing an excellent job of treating with the spiders. Best to leave him to it.

"I!" said Aragog, clicking angrily. "I was not born in the castle. I come from a distant land. A traveler gave me to Hagrid when I was an egg." *Really, Hagrid? Norbert was only your sloppy seconds?* "Hagrid was only a boy, but he cared for me, hidden in a cupboard in the castle, feeding me on scraps from the table. Hagrid is my good friend, and a good man. When I was discovered, and blamed for the death of a girl, he protected me. I have lived here in the

Forest ever since, where Hagrid still visits me. He even found me a wife, Mosag, and you see how our family has grown, all through Hagrid's goodness..."

"So you never- never attacked anyone?" Potter called.

"Never," croaked the old spider. "It would have been my instinct, but from respect of Hagrid, I never harmed a human. The body of the girl who was killed was discovered in a bathroom. I never saw any part of the castle but the cupboard in which I grew up. Our kind like the dark and the quiet..."

"But then... Do you know what did kill that girl?" said Potter. "Because whatever it is, it's back and attacking people again-"

And the spiders did not seem to like the sound of that, making all sorts of deranged clicking sounds and rustling about, and it chilled Draco's blood when he realized: *They're scared.*

What would scare these abominations?

Maybe... *a Basilisk?*

"The thing that lives in the castle is an ancient creature we spiders fear above all others. Well do I remember how I pleaded with Hagrid to let me go, when I sensed the beast moving about the school."

"What is it?" said Potter urgently, and Draco opened his mouth to say it: not to brag, but he thought it could be a Basilisk. Not because he knew the future or anything. Just because he was *exceptionally* intelligent.

Clicking and rustling went up around them. These spiders seriously needed to chill.

"We do not speak of it!" said Aragog fiercely. "We do not name it!" What was that thing, Voldemort Lite? "I never even told Hagrid the name of that dread creature, though he asked me, many times."

Aragog seemed to be tired of talking. He was backing slowly into his domed web, but his fellow spiders continued to inch slowly towards them. "We'll just go, then," Potter called desperately to Aragog, and Draco's hand became alert around his wand again.

"Go?" said Aragog slowly. "I think not..."

"But- but-"

"My sons and daughters do not harm Hagrid, on my command. But I cannot deny them fresh meat, when it wanders so willingly into our-"

"My father is one of the governors of Hogwarts!" Draco shrieked desperately. "Sonorus," he cast on himself. "My father is one of the governors of Hogwarts," he yelled again, "And he has a tracking charm on me! Avenseguim! He's always monitoring it, there's a map for it, and if I'm hurt here or die, it will show him where! He'll know where you all are, and he'll purge the forest!"

Draco had never thought he would resort to this again. But here it was, that old retort of his back again: *Wait till my father hears about this.*

At least that seemed to hold Aragog's tongue for a moment.

"Listen," Draco called, "I'm sure it would be, like, super-fun to eat us! But you can't think short-term! I know, it's tempting, but you have to think *longterm*, Aragog! I'm a very important person! Way too important and *monitored* to kill!"

"Spare the white-haired one," Aragog said. "And kill-"

"Imperio!" Draco hissed.

Nothing happened at first, but then he closed his eyes and imagined drawing deep from inside the wand. A shower of darkness exploded out, occluding the entire clearing and blocking out the moonlight. When it lifted, he could watch the light go dazed in the creature's great many eyes before him. Just like the spiders in Malfoy Manor.

Draco closed his eyes, feeling the tingling warmth go down his arm, with the wand feeling only an extension, like it was becoming part of his body, with a great set of warm marionette strings extended over the spider. "Aragog," Draco said, "Tell your children to carry us back to the edge of the Forbidden Forest closest to Hogwarts. Now."

Draco could feel Aragog's will straining at him, furious at first, but then, just as Madam Rosmerta's had, it fell into the wonderful warmth and surrendered. "Pick up the children," Aragog ordered, "And carry them back to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, closest to Hogwarts, now..."

The spiders might have been skeptical, to say the least, or fearful their leader had been enchanted. They moved towards the three of them anyway, though that still might have been with the intention of eating them.

Make sure they do what you say, Draco thought rather than spoke, a surge of words through that warm flickering connection, and felt Aragog's mind twist in response, like Draco's fingers were rifling stickily through it. And then he remembered Fang, and thought hard, *And make them take the dog with us.* "You are my children!" Aragog boomed and clicked over all of them. "You are all my progeny! I say these humans and this dog are not to be harmed! Obey me!"

And then a solid wall of spiders was upon them, but they were being lifted up again, no less unceremoniously than last time, and carried in the opposite direction they had come.

Draco clutched the talon wand to his chest, whispering *Thank you, thank you, thank you,* as the world swayed and dipped and lifted around him. He had to only trust now that Ron and Potter were being taken in the same direction.

After forever in that haze, the trees thinned. When Draco's head bounced backwards, he could see the sky.

Some time later, Draco's legs exploded in pain, pinpricks spreading everywhere where they had fallen asleep, as his body hit the ground, dropped right at the edge of the Forest as told. And Ron and Potter and even the dog were being dropped with him. The spiders bowed before leaving, clicking on their way off that slowly echoed fading until it had totally disappeared into the trees.

"Draco," Potter gasped, crawling over to him immediately. "Draco, are you alright?" His hands frantically pushed Draco's hair from his eyes.

"I'm alive too, if anyone's asking," Ron said crankily from their side, where his face was being licked by Fang.

It took them some time to get their bodies working again, and Draco had to be supported by Potter at first as they began their trudge back towards Hagrid's hut. "What did you do?" Ron asked in amazement. "That was incredible, Draco! Was that like Harry with the snake? It sounded like English, but- can you talk some kind of spider language?"

The elation Draco had felt at their salvation fell away. "I'll tell you later."

Potter went back into Hagrid's cabin to get the invisibility cloak. Fang was trembling under a blanket in his basket. The next thing Draco knew, he looked over and Ron was being violently sick in the pumpkin patch. Potter came over, looking concerned, but he didn't seem to be dying, just a little traumatized.

"Follow the spiders," said Ron weakly, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "I'll never forgive Hagrid. We're lucky to be alive. If Draco hadn't been able to talk to spiders..."

"I bet he thought Aragog wouldn't hurt friends of his," said Potter, and Draco wasted one of his epic Severus-length eye-rolls up at the moon.

"That's exactly Hagrid's problem!" said Ron, thumping the wall of the cabin. "He always thinks monsters aren't as bad as they're made out, and look where it's got him! A cell in Azkaban!" He was shivering uncontrollably now. "What was the point of sending us in there? What have we found out, I'd like to know?"

"That Hagrid never opened the Chamber of Secrets," said Potter, throwing the cloak over them and prodding Ron in the arm to make him walk. "He was innocent."

Ron gave a loud snort at the same time as Draco. It crossed Draco's mind that the spiders could have been lying for Hagrid, but given how for all intents and purposes Aragog had seemed to intend them eaten in seconds after anyway, there wouldn't have been much of a point.

When Draco saw the castle coming closer, looming above them like a mixed figure of sanctuary and judgment, he stopped walking. "Wait. Listen. Listen to me, Ron, Potter, you can't tell anyone what I did out there, alright? Even Hermione when she wakes up. The curse I used- did you hear?" Even if they hadn't heard the incantation, they'd learn about the Unforgivable Curses from Moody and figure it out eventually. "It was the Imperius curse,

alright? It's one of the Unforgivables. *I* would go to Azkaban if people knew I used it, so you can't tell anyone."

"That was dark magic?" Potter gasped.

"Right," Ron breathed, "That *was* the Imperius curse. Draco, how did you know how to do that? Have you ever done it before?"

"No! *No*!" Draco lied with great energy. "But it was all I could think of. You two owe me a life debt now, if you haven't noticed, so you'd better not. And you owe me *more*. You didn't listen to me all year when I told you and *told* you I wasn't the Heir, so if you tell on me about the Imperius, you're truly the most ungrateful Gryffindor sods that ever-"

"Draco," Potter said firmly, "It doesn't matter what spell you used. We're alive. Don't worry, we wouldn't tell on you no matter what, okay?" Draco looked at Ron, and he didn't hesitate before nodding. Draco seemed to have taken the Imperius situation as far more serious than they had.

"Yeah, mate," Ron said. "Save me from spiders with dark magic anytime."

Answers

Chapter Notes

Playlist

MOANING MYRTLE IS THE GIRL WHO WAS KILLED IN THE BATHROOM.

Draco looked up from the note Potter had flown over to him at breakfast. Potter and Ron waved their arms at him with sheer expressiveness, not even trying to be subtle, and Draco thought about it. He didn't even have to think long before he nodded over at them.

How had he not realized it? He'd known her so much longer than those two. He'd spent hours with her in sixth-year-

Although he supposed they had spent their time talking about *Draco's* life.

Why did there have to be so many disadvantages to being self-absorbed?

Let Potter and Ron think he had figured it out before they told him.

At least he was better-prepared for exams than the two of them. Somehow, even after everything that had happened, exams were looming upon them.

There were rumbles that Quidditch would be back at some point, with Hufflepuff double-booked. Their match with Gryffindor would have to be played, and then their final match with Slytherin, which had been due to be at the end of May, presumably moved back later. Draco could hardly believe he had just saved the Boy Who Lived from a giant spider with an Unforgivable, and yet he was still somehow expected to go right back to *playing Quidditch.*

At some point before school was out, Potter would have to go down into the Chamber of Secrets and slay a Basilisk. Draco's notebook had it sometime near the end of May. He had already serenely resolved that would not, in any way, shape, or form, involve one Draco Malfoy, who had risked his neck enough for fifteen lifetimes with those blasted spiders.

After all, he had to beat Cedric Diggory at Quidditch. Not that the game had ended up getting played last time, but, well, better safe than sorry. He'd beaten Diggory to the Snitch in third-year, but he'd had a growth spurt by then, which this current body had yet to undergo. Diggory was a picture of Seeker perfection strutting around the school already. If Draco lost to the boy he'd claimed as his crush to the other Slytherins, they'd never let him hear the end of it.

Three days before their first exam, Professor McGonagall made an announcement at breakfast. "I have good news," she said, and the Great Hall, instead of falling silent, erupted.

"Dumbledore's coming back!" several people yelled joyfully.

"You've caught the Heir of Slytherin!" squealed a girl on the Ravenclaw table. Draco was pleased to catch no one glancing in his direction at that.

"Quidditch matches are back on!" roared Oliver Wood excitedly from the Gryffindor table, which, could he just *not*?

When the hubbub subsided, Professor McGonagall said, "Professor Sprout has informed me that the Mandrakes are ready for cutting at last. Tonight, we will be able to revive those people who have been Petrified. I need hardly remind you all that one of them may well be able to tell us who, or what, attacked them. I am hopeful that this dreadful year will end with our catching the culprit."

Oh, so *this* was the day Potter went into the Chamber. Probably something to do with Myrtle's bathroom. Draco cheered with everyone, though he knew he might not live long enough to see Hermione again anyway, if he couldn't weasel his way out of *this* year's suicide mission.

It started springing into place when he caught sight of Ron and Potter sneaking away from the other Gryffindors in the corridor, with Lockhart derelict in guarding them. Severus merely gave a weary sigh and made no move to stop Draco from running to follow them, on their exciting field trip to Myrtle's bathroom. They faced stiffer opposition in McGonagall, who came upon them and looked none too pleased to see they had slipped the leash.

"Potter! Weasley! *Malfoy*! What are you doing?"

"We were- we were-" Ron stammered, "We were going to- to go and see-"

"Hermione," said Potter, and Draco could have kissed him. "We haven't seen her for ages, Professor, and we thought we'd sneak into the hospital wing, you know, and tell her the Mandrakes are nearly ready and, er, not to worry."

And just as Draco had suspected, that did the old bat in good. "Of course," she croaked, with a tear glimmering from her eye, and Draco bit his tongue to hold back laughter. "Of course, I realize this has all been hardest on the friends of those who have been... I quite understand."

Oh, yes, it's been very hard on us, whose friend was just petrified this month, as opposed to say, Creevey's friends. He's been petrified all bloody year- wait, does Creevey have *friends?*

"Yes, Potter, of course you may visit Miss Granger. I will inform your professors where you've gone. Tell Madam Pomfrey I have given my permission."

She gave a great honk of her nose as she departed, and Draco beamed at Potter.

"That," said Ron fervently, "Was the best story you've ever come up with."

Draco could only express his gratitude by giving Potter a kiss on the cheek. Ron was even more tickled by that, doubling over in laughter once he witnessed Potter's frozen face, as

good as if he'd been petrified by the monster. The two of them practically had to bodily drag him the rest of the way to the hospital wing. They had to follow McGonagall's orders now.

Madam Pomfrey let them in, but reluctantly. "There's just no point talking to a Petrified person," she said, and they had to admit she was right when they'd taken their seats next to Hermione. It was plain that Hermione didn't have the faintest inkling that she had visitors, and that they might just as well tell her bedside cabinet not to worry for all the good it would do. But it did give Draco a chance to play sadly with her bracelet, and serve the H for Hermione with some seriously judgmental looks.

"Wonder if she did see the attacker, though?" said Ron, looking sadly at Hermione's rigid face. "Because if he sneaked up on them all, no one'll ever know..."

But Harry wasn't looking at Hermione's face. He was more interested in her right hand. It lay clenched on top of her blankets, and he pushed Draco's hand out of the way, ignoring his indignant yelp. Bending closer, he seemed to see something, then waited for Madam Pomfrey to pass by before pointing out to them that a piece of paper was scrunched inside her fist.

"Try and get it out," Ron whispered, shifting his chair so that he blocked them from Madam Pomfrey's view, and Draco took on the task. He had the most delicate hands.

It was no easy task. Hermione's hand was clamped so tightly around the paper that Draco was sure he was going to tear it. While Ron kept watch he tugged and twisted, and at last, after several tense minutes, the paper came free.

It was a page torn from a very old library book. Draco was aghast at the thought of Hermione having willingly defaced a library book, which seemed to signify the apocalypse had truly come. But Potter was not so perturbed, as he smoothed it out eagerly and showed them to read.

"Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size, and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it."

Merlin's bollocks. No one ever listened to Draco, did they?

Beneath the passage, a single word had been written, in a hand Draco would never have failed to recognize as Hermione's. *Pipes.*

"Ron, Draco, look," Potter breathed, "This is it. This is the answer. The monster in the Chamber's a Basilisk- a giant serpent! That's why I've been hearing that voice all over the

place, and nobody else has heard it. It's because I understand Parseltongue..."

"Wait," Draco hissed. "You've been *what*?"

Potter looked up at the beds around them. "The Basilisk kills people by looking at them. But no one's died- because no one looked it straight in the eye. Colin saw it through his camera. The Basilisk burned up all the film inside it, but Colin just got Petrified. Justin... Justin must've seen the Basilisk through Nearly Headless Nick! Nick got the full blast of it, but he couldn't die again... and Hermione and that Ravenclaw Prefect were found with a mirror next to them. Hermione had just realized the monster was a Basilisk. I bet you anything she warned the first person she met to look round corners with a mirror first! And that girl pulled out her mirror- and-"

Ron's jaw had dropped. "And Mrs. Norris?" he whispered eagerly.

Potter seemed to think hard.

"The water..." Potter said slowly, "The flood from Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. I bet you Mrs. Norris only saw the reflection... Draco? Draco, are you alright?"

It all made sense, of course. It only left Draco to wonder, as was the case with Myrtle, how with his dark arts expertise and his foreknowledge of the future, he hadn't been the one to think of it.

If the hat had put Draco in Ravenclaw, it would have only been right to declare an inquest into the thing.

"'Oh, no, Draco, Basilisks *kill* anyone who looks at them!' 'Oh, Draco, you're so stupid to think it's a Basilisk!' *Bloody hell*!"

"Don't worry, he's fine, just ignore him," said Ron.

"The Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it!" Potter read aloud. "Hagrid's roosters were killed! The heir of Slytherin didn't want one anywhere near the castle once the Chamber was opened!" Ah, the blissful sound of Potter talking about the Heir and not meaning it to refer to Draco. That at least slightly soothed his wounded ego. "Spiders flee before the Basilisk! It all fits!"

"But how's the Basilisk been getting around the place?" said Ron. "A dirty great snake... Someone would've seen..."

Potter pointed at the word Hermione had scribbled at the foot of the page. "Pipes," he said. "Pipes... Ron, it's been using the plumbing. I've been hearing that voice inside the walls..."

"You know," Draco said crossly, "If you had *told* me you'd been hearing voices, Potter, at least after you stopped thinking I was the Heir, I could have figured it out a lot sooner..." Potter looked down, flushing guiltily. "*What,* Potter?"

"I thought you'd make fun of me," Potter mumbled.

Ron grabbed Potter's arm. "The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets!" he said hoarsely. "What if it's a bathroom? What if it's in-"

"Moaning Myrtle's bathroom," said Potter, and wow, sixth-year Draco had picked a poor hang-out spot-

And there it was, those splendidly suicidal Gryffindors looks on their faces again.

"This means," said Potter, "I can't be the only Parselmouth in the school. The Heir of Slytherin's one, too. That's how they've been controlling the Basilisk."

"What're we going to do?" said Ron, whose eyes were flashing. "Shall we go straight to McGonagall?"

Sweet Salazar. They were actually going to a teacher for once. Had spending enough time with Draco rubbed some of the Gryffindor off them?

"Let's go to the staff room," said Harry, jumping up. "She'll be there in ten minutes, it's nearly break."

They ran downstairs to the deserted staff room, a large, paneled room full of dark wooden chairs. But the bell to signal break never came, and Draco thought with a start, *Ginny Weasley, it's the girl, she's been taken, the professors aren't coming. Merlin, why didn't I just sneak around a corner and skedaddle while I still could?*

McGonagall's voice sounded out, magically amplified. "All students to return to their house dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staff room. Immediately, please."

Potter wheeled around to stare at them. "Not another attack? Not now?"

"What'll we do?" said Ron, aghast. "Go back to our dormitories?"

Draco opened his mouth to call that a very sensible idea.

"No," said Potter, glancing around. There was an ugly sort of wardrobe to his left, full of the teachers' cloaks. "In here. Let's hear what it's all about. Then we can tell them what we've found out." Draco began to sidle away in what he thought an unobtrusive manner, until Potter's arm shot out and snagged Draco to pull him forcibly into the cupboard with them.

"What is it with you and your thing for dragging me inside cabinets?" Draco hissed at Potter. "Do you have some kind of *fetish* for them?"

Potter seemed to consider for a moment. "I did use to live in a cupboard."

"Not funny, Potter!" Draco hissed, and Ron looked glad to be between them. He held up a finger to his lips, and they hid themselves inside the cabinet silently, listening to the rumbling of hundreds of people moving overhead, and the staff-room door banging open. From between the musty folds of the cloaks, they watched the teachers filtering into the room. Some of them were looking puzzled, others downright scared, though Draco was pleased to see Severus looking regally unperturbed as ever. Then McGonagall arrived.

"It has happened," she told the silent staff room. "A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself."

Flitwick let out a squeal. Sprout clapped her hands over her mouth. Severus gripped the back of a chair very hard and said, "How can you be sure?"

Oh no. Draco's noble attempts to save Ginny Weasley had failed. Ah, well. There was already an excessive quantity of Weasleys. It wasn't like they couldn't spare one or two.

"The Heir of Slytherin," said McGonagall, who was very white, "Left another message. Right underneath the first one. 'Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.'"

Professor Flitwick burst into tears.

"Who is it?" said Madam Hooch, who had sunk, weak-kneed into a chair. "Which student?"

"Luna Lovegood," said McGonagall, and Draco had to cover his own mouth not to scream.

"We shall have to send all the students home tomorrow. This is the end of Hogwarts. Dumbledore always said..."

The staff-room door banged open again to admit Lockhart. "So sorry- dozed off- what have I missed?"

He didn't seem to notice that the other teachers were looking at him with something remarkably like hatred. Severus stepped forward, and the intent was palpable in the air even before he spoke, the exquisite malice. But Draco could barely even feel it, let alone enjoy it. He could feel his fingers going numb.

"Just the man," Severus said. "The very man. A girl has been snatched by the monster, Lockhart. Taken into the Chamber of Secrets itself. Your moment has come at last."

Lockhart blanched, his handsome face turned to a frozen mask as his eyes pleaded for mercy, mercy that would never be coming from Severus.

"That's right, Gilderoy," chipped in Sprout. "Weren't you saying just last night that you've known all along where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is?"

"I- well, I-" spluttered Lockhart.

"Yes, didn't you tell me you were sure you knew what was inside it?" piped up Flitwick.

"D-did I? I don't recall..."

"I certainly remember you saying you were sorry you hadn't had a crack at the monster before Hagrid was arrested," said Severus. "Didn't you say that the whole affair had been bungled, and that you should have been given a free rein from the first?"

Lockhart stared around at his stony-faced colleagues, with his eyes resting the longest on Severus, full of betrayal. "I... I really never... You may have misunderstood..."

"We'll leave it to you, then, Gilderoy," said McGonagall. "Tonight will be an excellent time to do it. We'll make sure everyone's out of your way. You'll be able to tackle the monster all by yourself. A free rein at last."

Lockhart gazed desperately around him, but nobody came to the rescue. Severus looked more likely to keep goading it on than have a chance of heart and come to his secret admirer's aid. Draco hadn't seen him look this pleased with himself in years.

"V-very well," Lockhart said, taking one last longing look at Severus before seeming to draw himself up in determination. "I'll- I'll be in my office, getting- getting ready." And he left the room.

"Right," said McGonagall, whose nostrils were flared, "That's got him out from under our feet. The Heads of Houses should go and inform their students what has happened. Tell them the Hogwarts Express will take them home first thing tomorrow. Will the rest of you please make sure no students have been left outside their dormitories?"

The teachers rose, and left one by one.

Draco pushed his way out of the cabinet as soon as he could, gasping for breath. Ron and Potter followed, looking worried and sheepish, doubly so once Draco had staggered over to sit in one of those dark wooden chairs, gripping the edge of the table as if his life depended on it. Unconsciously, he'd stumbled a bit farther than necessary, to sit in the chair Severus had vacated.

"Draco?" Ron said worriedly. "Sorry, mate, are you really claustrophobic? We just had to..."

"It's fine," Draco gasped, squeezing his eyes shut tightly as they began to leak uncontrollably, but the wheezing was worse. He clutched onto his chest instead, and Potter raced to his side, touching his cheek with that distracting gentleness Draco could never convince himself he even slightly deserved. He didn't even deserve to sit in Severus's chair.

Squeezing his eyes shut tighter, Draco let himself slide out of Severus's chair to the ground, wiping angrily at his face with the sleeves of his robe, with his nose starting to stop up like breath wouldn't go through it even if his lungs were working properly. He opened them to glare as he heard Ron and Potter settle on the ground beside him, with the gall to have these genuinely worried-looking expressions on their faces. "Don't worry, blunderbusses," Draco panted, "It will pass, I'm not going to die," and Potter grabbed him by the shoulders like he thought Draco was dying already.

"What's going on, Draco? Were you cursed?" Potter asked with utmost sincerity in those green eyes that were a mere blur to Draco, a smeared blot clouded together with Potter's glasses like a reflection in a lake hit by a stone. Draco had never been able to stand being touched when he got like this, but somehow, just as it had at Ollivander's the first time he met this Potter, Potter was an exception.

"It's only this fit I have sometimes," Draco forced out, while Ron conjured a handkerchief and tried to wipe at his forehead. "It's- I have trouble breathing. It's just because I'm screwed up- it's a... mind thing. I'll be fine in- in just a minute, so just..." He didn't have the will to tell

them to leave him alone, if it would make Potter stop holding his shoulders. "What- what do you care? You- you two- you never would listen, never would- just thought- thought it was me..."

"I'm sorry," Potter said intently, and gripped both sides of Draco's face, forcing Draco to stare at the Potter-blur as if that would leave no doubt as to the pitch of his sincerity. "If I never said out loud that before, I'm sorry. I really am so sorry I didn't believe you, Draco." And then he elbowed Ron, and Draco let out a long shuddering gasp that turned to laughter at Ron's response.

"Yeah, I'm sorry too, again, for the thousandth time," Ron said, "Though it was mainly Harry who convinced me," and earned a more severe elbowing. "What! It's true! You were always so sure, and you're the local expert on Draco Malfoy..."

"Shut *up*, Ron!" Potter hissed, in a voice that indicated Draco would be enjoying this scene if he could observe it properly.

Potter and Ron sat down there with him, though it took longer than usual for the fit to pass. They sat talking with him about random things, Ron wiping at his face and Potter rubbing his back and shoulders, for some indeterminate stretch of time, until even Draco's childish body was starting to feel stiff from sitting on the hard floor. Potter kept blurting out apologies apropos of nothing, whether for not believing in Draco's innocence or for the mistaken idea he'd caused Draco's respiratory fit, by forcing him into the cabinet with them. Eventually, Draco's lungs started working well enough for his mind to work again with them. "It doesn't make any sense," he said weakly. "Luna Lovegood's a pureblood. Why would the Basilisk target her like this?" Pureblooded Ginny Weasley had been tied up with the diary, yes, but the diary wasn't...

"Wait, she is?" Potter asked, frowning. Draco supposed he couldn't expect them know a random Ravenclaw first-year, just because she would someday help them get Draco's father arrested.

"She is," Draco said, "And if we don't do something, she's probably going to be dead soon, if she's not already." He found that after that moment of weakness, albeit a very long and extended moment, a leaden certainty had dropped into place about what he had to do. This was his fault. If he hadn't intervened, it would still be Ginny Weasley taken down there, and Potter and Ron wouldn't be so contentedly dawdling, taking care of Draco. Lovegood was about to die, and it would be Draco's fault for meddling in the timeline. Unless he made sure Potter stopped it.

"D'you know what?" said Ron, "I think we should go and see Lockhart. Tell him what we know. He's going to try and get into the Chamber. We can tell him where we think it is, and tell him it's a Basilisk in there."

That must have been when Lockhart got Obliviated. It would probably be safer to stick to the blue loop, then, and bring him.

It was a split-second decision whether or not to show mercy. And Malfoys were hardly known for mercy.

But Draco remembered the sight of Severus's chambers filled with golden roses.

"Why bother?" Draco said impatiently. "He's not going to be of any use anyway, he's a bloody fraud, and Hermione's not here to tell us otherwise because Lockhart couldn't stop what's going on in the Chamber any more than Justin bloody Finch-Fletchley could. Let's just go. Let's go find Myrtle and go to the Chamber of Secrets and get Lovegood out of there."

Potter and Ron surveyed him looking rather stunned. "Cor, Draco," Ron said, "You sound like a Gryffindor."

"It's common sense," Draco hissed. "We've already wasted too much time, and can't waste any more, because the longer it goes after that announcement, the higher probability Lovegood is already dead!"

Potter was the one to guide them along the dark corridors towards Myrtle's bathroom. Draco had never had the best sense of direction, especially when he was this anxious. They passed the message on the wall, and Draco gripped Potter's sleeve until they passed it, trying not to look at the words bragging of Lovegood's death that would be one more death on his conscience, one more loss that was his fault, a loss he could not afford because Lovegood had been sweet to *him*, her captor. She had spoke to him and smiled at him in her cell and been calm and patient and kind...

"Bloody hell, Draco," Ron called as they hurried along, "You're really upset, aren't you? Do you know this girl or something?"

Draco froze at the door to Myrtle's bathroom, realizing there was no way to explain the responsibility he felt for Lovegood. He didn't have time to think about his lie. Her bright white-blond hair came to his mind, and he blurted the first thing he could come up with. "If you must know, she's my cousin, alright! Now let's go!"

"Cousin?" Ron said doubtfully. "You never mentioned her."

"As it happens, our families aren't exactly close," Draco hissed, "Given that her father is the editor of the *Quibbler*. Not exactly the right sort, the Lovegoods. Now can we get a move along? Time for heroics, Chosen One! Move! You too, Ron! I didn't save your stupid lives back in that forest for you to let my cousin die!"

"Okay, okay!" went Potter, as Draco dragged him into the bathroom by the collar, Ron following behind. Moaning Myrtle was sitting on a cistern. "Oh, it's you," she said when she saw Potter. "And it's that pretty blond boy from Halloween. You never came to *see* me, dear."

One conversation with you had this lot thinking I was the Heir of Slytherin. I couldn't risk another.

"Myrtle," Draco said, "I'm sorry, but there's been a lot going on. This year has been horrible. And we really need your help, please."

"What is it?" she simpered.

"To ask you how you died," said Potter.

Myrtle got a look on her face like Draco had followed through on his old plot of trapping Gryffindor boys under the mistletoe with her. "Ooh, it was dreadful," she said, with a macabre sort of lasciviousness in her tone. "It happened right in here. I died in this very cubicle. I remember it so well. I'd hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a boy speaking. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then-" Myrtle was clearly reaching the climax of her story, to judge by her ecstatic expression, "I died."

"How?" said Potter.

"No idea," said Myrtle rather dramatically, enjoying being the center of attention. "I just remember seeing a pair of great big yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away..." She looked dreamily at them. "And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she'd ever laughed at my glasses."

Draco hadn't been completely self-absorbed. He did remember letting Myrtle rant to him once or twice about *that Olive Hornby*.

"Where exactly did you see the eyes?" said Potter.

"Somewhere there," said Myrtle, pointing vaguely towards the sink in front of her toilet.

It looked like an ordinary sink. They examined every inch of it, inside and out, including the pipes below. And then Potter was the one to spot it: scratched on the side of one of the copper taps was a tiny snake.

"That tap's never worked," said Myrtle brightly, as he tried to turn it.

"Harry," said Ron, "Say something. Something in Parseltongue."

"But-" Potter seemed to be concentrating hard, but when he finally spoke, "Open up" came out in human language.

Potter looked at Draco, who shook his head. "Oh, Potter. Trust you to get performance anxiety when faced with a *snake*." Neither of the second-years seemed to understand the joke enough to be offended. "Need me to conjure you another snake?"

"Don't you dare!" Ron protested, but Draco's taunt had made Potter look back at the carving with new determination. Hissing sounds came out of Potter's mouth, at once turning him from a mere second-year to something eerie and ethereal, even before the tap glowed with a brilliant white light and began to spin. And then the sink slowly lowered itself down into the floor and beyond the range of sight, showing a pipe with a human-sized opening, which did not at all look like a dignified place for a Malfoy to climb down, but would perhaps have been acceptable to deign to enter in a pinch, if actually saving his cousin.

Ron gasped, while Potter got that incredible calm command on his face that he had when negotiating with Aragog. "I'm going down there," he said, and Draco resisted the urge to kiss him on the cheek again.

"Me too," said Ron, and Draco nodded.

"No need to talk me into it this time," he agreed. "No cousin of a Malfoy is going to die somewhere whose entrance is a *bathroom*."

"Just like last year," Ron said with forced brightness, and Draco was glad he'd gotten his respiratory fit over for the day. "Guess we just slide on down, huh?"

"Because that worked so well last time with the Devil's Snare- hey! Potter! What are you- damn it!" Draco groaned, and dropped into the pipe before he could think better of it.

It took longer than falling through the trapdoor, though in the great undignified sliding of it all through this slimy rotten place- imagine, a Malfoy in the *sewers*, without even the excuse of an important murder to commit there- but he had the reassurance of Potter ahead and Ron behind him, with Ron making a rather more awkward thumping way through by the sound of it.

"Better ride than the spiders!" Draco shouted rather hysterically, but he heard the two of them laughing, before the pipe unceremoniously ejected them all in a heap of slimy second-years. Draco's hand went immediately to check his wand at his side, but it was no more bent than usual. He took it out instinctively, and couldn't make himself put it back in his pocket.

"We must be miles under the school," said Potter, voice echoing in the tunnel. Say one thing for following Gryffindors about, it did give a more expansive tour of the attractions of Hogwarts.

"Under the lake, probably," said Ron, squinting around at the dark walls, and Draco had to hold himself back from complimenting Ron on his unusually astute deduction. It would make sense for it to be under the lake, for it to be this wet. Unless the Basilisk made *secretions*.

"Okay, let's go," Draco said. "All we need to know about where we are is that Luna Lovegood is here."

"Lumos!" Potter muttered to his wand and it lit again. "C'mon," he said to Ron and Draco, and off they went, their footsteps slapping loudly on the wet floor.

"Lumos!" Draco cast in turn, and Ron followed, but they could still barely see past the lights. All the extra charms did was make their shadows against the glistening walls taller, three looming monsters preparing to pounce on their personal targets.

"Remember," Potter said quietly, as they walked cautiously forward, "Any sign of movement, close your eyes straight away..."

You know, a more intelligent person than Draco, knowing full well that it *was* a Basilisk down here, might have dedicated at least a modicum of time to researching spells that could

help with the whole looking-at-it-equals-instant-death problem.

He wished that the Weasley twins had already invented that instant darkness powder, unless facing a Basilisk through the darkness still counted.

Draco cried out when there was a crunch, throwing a hand over his eyes and nearly dropping his wand in fear, before Potter's hands were on him, roughly pulling his hand down with a groan. "Calm down, it's just a skull he stepped on," Potter sighed, giving Draco the feeling that for all his posing of bravery he had started to act like a Longbottom. It was a powerful motivator, in a way. Nothing in his life, not even fear of his father's anger, had ever stirred Draco into action more than not wanting to be embarrassed in front of Harry Potter.

"There's all kinds of bones," Draco observed as casually as he could, pretending he hadn't just been the only one to scream. Potter's wand lowered and lit up a whole path worth of them, which wasn't at all menacing. Still, he let Potter take the lead as they reached a bend in the tunnel.

"Harry, there's something up there..." said Ron hoarsely, grabbing Potter's shoulder.

Draco took another step back behind Potter. *I'm a lover, not a fighter*. *They need me back here. I'm too valuable to be risked, I'm the only member of this heroic party of any brains* or *looks...*

Potter and Ron stood there watching for a moment, and slowly, Draco's eyes adjusted too to the sight over Potter's shoulder of something big and suspiciously Basilisk-looking-

Wait. Where the bloody hell was Potter's sword? Was this just something he hadn't gotten around to telling Draco, like the voices in the wall? Would he have found himself some great big hero sword by now, if it wasn't for Draco throwing him off the scent of the real Heir?

"Maybe it's asleep," Potter breathed, glancing back at them. Draco bit back a sarcastic question whether Potter had brought that old whittled flute of Hagrid's. It had worked on *Fluffy.*

Very slowly, as if he was a veteran of many wars and not just a second-year, Potter edged forward, his wand held high. The light slid over a gigantic snake skin, of a vivid, poisonous green, lying curled and empty across the tunnel floor. The creature that had shed it must have been twenty feet long at least. In other circumstances, it might have been pretty. If you tilted your head, it looked a bit like the pile of green and silver wrapping paper beside Severus's Christmas tree.

Draco had spent much of his life thinking Severus infallible, apart from the moment Severus got himself fed to a giant snake. But at this sight, even Severus might have to admit the possibility that the monster of the Chamber might just turn out to be a Basilisk.

"Blimey," said Ron weakly.

"No, this is good," Draco said, putting on far more assurance than he felt. "Very useful. Gives us a rough idea of the size and shape of the beast. It must have been recently shed, to hold its

shape so much. And we can predict the height of the eyes, like this..." Draco waved his wand around the shed skin, as if that would demonstrate a thing, but Potter and Ron's shadowed faces did look somewhat reassured, so that was something.

"Okay," Potter said, and as his jaw set, that stubborn look came on his face that wasn't any different from the one he had worn facing Voldemort in the Hogwarts courtyard.

Potter led them past the giant snake skin bravely, though Ron kept sneaking glances back at it like he expected it to come to life at any moment. Draco stayed quiet in the tunnel as they went through a great length of wet black walls and bends and shadows, though it just made him more anxious. He would look sometimes down at the distinctive bend of his wand to calm himself, sometimes over at Potter's determined heroic face, and sometimes even at Ron on Potter's other side, who looked somehow even more terrified than Draco felt, and yet whose feet seemed to be having no trouble moving themselves forward.

Draco practically bit through his lip to stop himself crying out again, when they came up to a solid wall ahead on which two entwined serpents were carved, their eyes set with great, glinting emeralds. He had hated every step down the tunnel, but now that they had reached its end, he almost wished it could have gone on forever. And Potter had stopped before it, turning to look at Draco, but the words that came out of his mouth were borderline incomprehensible. "Draco, do you remember when you caught the Snitch against Ravenclaw?"

"What?" Draco said, while Ron looked stumped, as if trying to figure out how this would somehow prove to be a helpful reference. "Yes, of course, why?"

Potter bit his lip, squared his shoulders, and asked, "When you almost ran me over, and then you... you transfigured the Snitch and gave it to me. Do you remember? Was that... was that just a joke, Draco? Just because of what I'd yelled at you before, or- did you mean it? I don't..."

"I have no bloody idea what he's talking about," said Ron, and Draco forced a smile.

"Me either," said Draco. "Come on, Potter. Ask me when my cousin isn't dying."

He didn't know how Potter could make himself just walk up like that, and the air of destiny was something swelling up unmistakably around him then. The awe almost crushed at Draco, as the Parseltongue came out of Potter's mouth this time without a failure. The serpents parted as the wall cracked open, the halves slid smoothly out of sight, and Potter, trembling but not looking back once, led Draco and Ron inside.

The Heir of Slytherin

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Potter led them to the end of a very long, dimly lit chamber. Towering stone pillars entwined with more carved serpents rose to support a ceiling lost in darkness, casting long black shadows through the odd, greenish gloom that filled the place. Yes, a Slytherin had definitely been the one to do the interior decorating.

"Draw your wands," Draco barked, and Ron pulled his back out. "And stay behind Potter." Ron was none too shy in following that suggestion either.

Potter didn't stop the two of them from skulking behind him, as they moved forward between the serpentine columns. The dramatic way the footsteps echoed was definitely a Slytherin sort of acoustic design. The place seemed like something Voldemort would have liked.

Potter would turn back to them from time to time, gesturing to his own narrowed eyes, advertising that they should shut them at any moment. Sometimes even Potter's eyes, though, would stray towards the stone snakes on the walls. "Are they talking to you?" Draco hissed.

"No," Potter said with a shudder, "I don't think so," and kept on walking.

And then, as they drew level with the last pair of pillars, a statue high as the Chamber itself loomed into view, standing against the back wall. A giant face hung above them, more old and decrepit than Ollivander after a few months staying in Chez Malfoy, with a long thin beard that fell almost to the bottom of the wizard's sweeping stone robes, whose illusion of movement gave a passable attempt at sculpting for an edifice that size.

If that was Salazar Slytherin, Draco reflected, he could only be grateful he was not their ancestor, to have *that* painting sullying their portrait hall, with those oversized feet stood on the smooth chamber floor- between which, face-down, lay a small, black and blue-robed figure, with brilliant white-blond hair-

"Luna!" Draco shouted, running forward and throwing himself down to grab at her. It was an awful sort of poetic justice. He'd tried to make things *better* in the world, and all he had done was hasten the years before he would once again be visiting a captive Luna Lovegood in a dungeon.

"Luna! Luna, wake up!" He turned her over and her already pale skin was as white as an alabaster statue, but her closed eyes meant she wasn't petrified. "Enervate!" he tried, and shook her when there was no effect.

"Draco!" Ron cried out, and Draco looked up to see someone standing over him.

Draco spun around to find a tall, strikingly handsome black-haired boy leaning against the nearest pillar watching. He looked blurred at the edges- as he had to be, for someone who should be as old as Hagrid by now.

"Abraxas?" the boy said, frowning at him in dismay. That gave Draco a last bit of certainty he hadn't needed.

"Tom Riddle," Draco greeted in turn, not letting the wand slip an inch lower in his hand.

Riddle's smirk faded slightly. "No, you're Draco, aren't you? The grandson. Luna told me about you. She was curious about you. Everyone thought you were the Heir of Slytherin."

Draco nodded warily, watching Riddle's hands for any sign of movement. "But that was you, wasn't it? Now and fifty years ago."

"Draco, who is this? What's going on?" Potter called, and a smirk spread across Riddle's face.

"He's the student," Draco said unsteadily, "Who framed Hagrid. Wake her up, Riddle," he hissed, "Give her back *now*," and Riddle laughed, expression benignly, boyishly handsome.

"She won't wake," Riddle said. "She's still alive. But only just."

"Who are you?" Ron asked.

"A memory," said Riddle quietly. "Preserved in a diary for fifty years."

Riddle pointed towards the feet of the statue, and behind Draco and Luna, there it was, the diary that should have been only dust behind a wall.

"That- that was destroyed," Draco stammered, "My godfather, he wouldn't have lied to me," and Riddle looked impressed enough at his own cunning to indulge Draco.

"Oh, he didn't think he was lying," Riddle drawled. "And I might have become better friends with him after his failure, were it not for you, Draco Malfoy."

He waved his hand, and a scene slipped in wisps of silver light out of Luna's head to float in the air before them: Luna sitting alone in the last compartment of the Hogwarts Express, staring out the window, only for the door to open and Draco to lurch in, looking singularly unsteady. "Lovegood?" the Draco in the image asked, wide-eyed.

Luna introduced herself. "Yes. I'm Luna Lovegood, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"I have to go," Draco blurted, looking like he was about to die, and bolted.

"Really, Draco," Riddle admonished facetiously. "For a Malfoy, you have very few manners..."

The scene changed to Luna wandering up the corridor of the Hogwarts Express, looking worried, and staring through the panes, only to see a group of girls her age in one of the compartments, sharing chocolate frogs. Luna took a deep breath, visibly gathering her courage, before knocking on the compartment. When she entered, Draco only recognized one of the girls: Ginny Weasley.

"Hello," Luna said shyly. "Have any of you seen a boy come past? He seemed to be having some trouble. I was worried."

The girls exchanged glances. "No," said an unfamiliar blonde girl. "What did he look like?"

"He was a Slytherin," Luna said, "Not much older than us. He had very blond hair..."

"As blond as yours?" Ginny asked, and Luna nodded. "Oh, that would be Draco. Draco Malfoy. *You're* worried about *him*?" Luna nodded again, and Ginny grimaced with doubt. "Okay..."

"What was his name?" Luna asked politely. "Would you please write it down for me?"

"Sure," Ginny said, looking eager to get rid of the intruder, and reached into her bag, pulling out Riddle's diary. She ripped a page from near the center, and wrote *Draco Malfoy* across it before handing it to Luna.

The scene changed to the Hogwarts Great Hall, with Luna standing there watching Draco and Hermione leave together, talking intently. She seemed unable to gather the courage to approach him. It changed again to the Great Hall the next day, with Draco berating Theo for something or other and walking right past her. And again, and again, until it changed to the Ravenclaw girls' dorm. The other first-years were teasing Luna about having a crush on the Slytherin second-year.

"It's not that," said Luna. "I just met him on the train, and he seemed to need help..."

All the other girls laughed, none too nicely. "Luna, we've heard about Malfoy. He's famous at Hogwarts. He's a great wizard already. He's friends with Harry Potter. He's got a *mountain troll.* He doesn't need *your* help."

"He's not going to want to talk to *you*," another girl said cuttingly, and as Luna turned away with a sigh, there was a whisper behind her back of "Loony Lovegood," and a chorus of giggles.

The last images Riddle showed began with a shock of Fiendfyre destroying the diary in Severus's fireplace, the heads of serpents and dragons making Draco shudder. "Your godfather almost had it," Riddle gloated. "Liquid Fiendfyre. A beautiful invention from a hideous man. Except he left out one part... unlike the Fiendfyre curse, the potion is not *ever-burning.* Perhaps it still would have worked, though, there's no knowing... if I did not already have an *exit strategy* in place. When the Fiendfyre began to burn and I saw my time was up, I knew where to go. Yes, I knew exactly where to go... right to *your name*." The diary writhing in Severus's Liquid Fiendfyre was possessed by a silvery flash, before it escaped in an

invisible wind that swept out of Severus's chambers, past a fleeing Draco out of the dungeons, and towards Ravenclaw tower.

The wind settled into the slip of paper with on it in the bottom of Luna's bag, with DRACO MALFOY written across it in Ginny's handwriting. The paper lit up with a bright fiery color, and began to change, going from one page, to two, to three, and again, and again, until covers were sliding into place. "So you see, the diary was destroyed, but not all of it, and not completely. A piece remained with Luna, so when the Fiendfyre came to the diary, I sent my consciousness to join her in that old crumbled note in her bag. After that, it was easy to grow the diary from the paper, back to exactly what it had been before."

Draco felt his eyes threaten to water. He looked over towards Ron and Potter, who were staring accusingly, though thankfully at Riddle rather than Draco.

Draco took his chance, raising his wand. "Sectum-"

"Expelliarmus!" called Riddle, and with a lazy wandless wave, all three of their wands came flying over to him, where he pocketed them each in turn, like a child collecting sweets in his pocket. He pulled Potter's out after, though, toying with it between his fingers.

"I've waited a long time for this, Harry Potter," said Riddle. "For the chance to see you. To speak to you. It's a shame to have these *interlopers* here..."

"Tell us what you did to Draco's cousin," Potter demanded, voice only shaking slightly, even with his wand in their enemy's hand.

"His cousin?" Riddle asked in mild surprise, and looked between them. "I suppose I can see the resemblance. Although you were a stranger to *her*."

"I preferred it that way. Our fathers weren't close," Draco said tightly.

"Of course not," Riddle laughed. "No wonder you ran from her on that train sooner than admit the connection. Abraxas's son would never have countenanced any association with this girl's father, let alone this absent-minded, strange girl. Not well-liked, little Luna. Her fellow Ravenclaws think her too stupid for their house. They play tricks on her. You can imagine what a relief it was for this outcast little girl to open her heart and spill her secrets to an invisible stranger."

"The diary?" Potter asked, eyes going to the diary behind Draco and Luna like he was considering springing for it, if Riddle hadn't had all their wands.

"Yes, Potter, of course," Riddle laughed. "My diary. Little Luna's been writing in it ever since October, telling me all of her interesting and lonely thoughts: how only she could see the Thestrals, how she has nightmares of watching her mother die, how nice it would be to have a friend someday, and what a pretty snake it was that Draco Malfoy conjured in a duel against *the* Harry Potter... but it almost seemed to her like she could understand what the snake was saying, so she knew it didn't mean any harm... really, none of you even noticed that? She nearly gave the whole game away..."

All the time he spoke, Riddle's eyes never left Potter's face, like he wanted to eat him up and swallow him whole, the way a boa constrictor swallowed. "It's very boring, having to listen to the petty troubles of a homesick little girl," he went on. "But I was patient. I wrote back, I was sympathetic, I was kind. And Luna appreciated me. She thought it so interesting, so clever, that a diary could have just come to her like this, and spoken with her when she had no other friend. She believed it was old magic that had summoned me to her, that we were destined to know one another." Riddle laughed, a high, cold laugh that sounded eerily familiar to Draco, and made it hard not to hold his breath. "If I say it myself, gentlemen, I've always been able to charm the people I needed. Your grandfather certainly proved no different, young Malfoy."

"I'm sure he still looked down on you," Draco bit out, "Being *Muggleborn*."

"Draco!" Ron hissed, looking worried that incensing the madman would be the end of them. But what did it matter? They were dead already. Unless Potter had that sword stored somewhere.

Riddle's eyes did flicker, with a deadly sort of annoyance, before his smug composure returned. "Except I *wasn't*, was I? I was the Heir of Slytherin. And to Luna, I was her *soulmate*." He hadn't seemed to like having his evil monologue interrupted. It was much like Voldemort had reacted, the times he really got going on some tangent and then Aunt Bella had to stick her yap in.

"'Dear Tom,'" he quoted drolly, "'I know you're fifteen and I'm only eleven, but I think I like you.' 'Dear Tom, I know you're fifteen and I've still only just turned twelve, but I wish I could kiss you. I want you to teach me...'"

"You're a monster," Harry snapped, and Riddle shrugged elegantly.

"So Luna poured out her soul to me, and her soul happened to be exactly what I wanted. I grew stronger and stronger on a diet of her deepest loneliness, her darkest wishes. I grew powerful, far more powerful than little Miss Lovegood, who was, after all, so curious about me... so full of thirst for secrets, this little Ravenclaw, and I grew powerful from it... powerful enough to start pouring a little of my soul back into her..."

"What d'you mean?" Potter asked, and Draco glanced between Riddle and the diary, before Riddle casually flicked Potter's wand in his direction to make it clear the glance had not been missed, and Draco was to stay still.

"Haven't you guessed yet, Harry Potter?" said Riddle softly. "Luna Lovegood opened the Chamber of Secrets. She strangled the school roosters and daubed threatening messages on the walls. She set the serpent of Slytherin on four Mudbloods, and the Squib's cat."

That was actually promising, if it suggested a limit to the corporeal powers of Riddle himself. Though it hadn't kept him from disarming all of them with ease. And there was the small matter of a Basilisk somewhere at play.

"Of course, she didn't know what she was doing at first," Riddle went on. "It was very amusing. I wish you could have seen your cousin's diary entries, young Malfoy. Far more

interesting in time. 'Dear Tom,'" he recited, seeming to enjoy watching Draco's face, "'I think I'm losing my memory. There are rooster feathers all over my robes and I don't know how they got there. It must be the Wrackspurts again.' 'Dear Tom, I can't remember what I did on the night of Halloween, but a cat was attacked and I've got paint all down my front. Are the Nargles getting into my head?'

"'Dear Tom, the girls in Ravenclaw are saying I'm even paler and uglier than usual, that I look like the Heir of Slytherin. But what if the one doing all this isn't really Draco Malfoy?' 'Dear Tom, there was another attack today...' but somehow, the girl never became suspicious of *me.* Even after she became suspicious of herself. Maybe she would have gone to someone for help if she had a friend in the world. Anyone she could trust but me. But it was me who she wrote to, up to this very morning, pouring out her heart. 'Tom, Tom, my love, what should I *do*...' And now she has led *you* to me, Harry Potter, the one I most wanted to meet..."

"And why did you want to meet me?" Potter snapped.

"Well, you see, Luna told me all about you, Harry," said Riddle. "Your whole fascinating history. She was writing all sorts of missives back about you to her father about famous Harry Potter for the *Quibbler.* That's their ridiculous newspaper, you see. She was their reporter on you."

"I've heard of it," Draco muttered.

Riddle's eyes roved over the lightning scar on Potter's forehead, and his expression grew hungrier. "I knew I must find out more about you, talk to you, meet you if I could. Especially when Luna told me all about your friendship with that great oaf Hagrid. Hagrid, still at Hogwarts! Imagine!"

"Hagrid's my friend," said Potter, his voice now shaking. "And you framed him, didn't you?"

Riddle laughed his high laugh again. "It was my word against Hagrid's, Harry. Well, you can imagine how it looked to old Armando Dippet. On the one hand, I was Tom Riddle, poor but brilliant, parentless but so brave, school Prefect, model student; on the other hand, big, blundering Hagrid, in trouble every other week, trying to raise werewolf cubs under his bed, sneaking off to the Forbidden Forest to wrestle trolls. But I admit, even I was surprised how well the plan worked. I thought someone must realize that Hagrid couldn't possibly be the Heir of Slytherin. It had taken me five whole years to find out everything I could about the Chamber of Secrets and discover the secret entrance... as though Hagrid had the brains, or the power!

"Only the Transfiguration teacher, Dumbledore, seemed to think Hagrid was innocent. He persuaded Dippet to keep Hagrid and train him as gamekeeper. Yes, I think Dumbledore might have guessed. Dumbledore never seemed to like me as much as the other teachers did..."

"Can't imagine why," Ron muttered, and Draco caught his eye and laughed despite everything.

"I bet Dumbledore saw right through you," said Potter, his teeth gritted.

"Well, he certainly kept an annoyingly close watch on me after Hagrid was expelled," said Riddle carelessly. "I knew it wouldn't be safe to open the Chamber again while I was still at school. But I wasn't going to waste those long years I'd spent searching for it. I decided to leave behind a diary, preserving my sixteen-year-old self in its pages, so that one day, with luck, I would be able to lead another in my footsteps, and finish Salazar Slytherin's noble work."

"Well, you haven't finished it," said Potter triumphantly. "No one's died this time, not even the cat. In a few hours the Mandrake draught will be ready and everyone who was Petrified will be all right again."

And that was a comfort, that even if Draco had somehow led the savior and his best friend to death like lambs to the slaughter, at least somewhere above them soon, Hermione would be waking up.

"Haven't I already told you," said Riddle quietly, "That killing Mudbloods doesn't matter to me anymore? For many months now, my new target has been- you."

Of course it was. Perish the thought that anything ever *not* be all about Potter.

"From everything Luna had written about you, I know you like to play the hero. And once your Mudblood whore had been taken-"

Potter had to hold back Ron from springing forward.

"I knew that you would go to any lengths to solve the mystery- particularly if another poor helpless little girl had been attacked. And Luna had told me you could speak Parseltongue...

"So I made Luna write her own farewell on the wall and come down here to wait. And she was quite happy, and fascinated at all the new sights and sounds, and was admiring the great statue of Salazar up until the moment she slumped down to die at it. No, there isn't much life left in her anymore. She put too much into the diary, into me, her *soulmate*. Enough to let me leave its pages at last. I have been waiting for you to appear since we arrived here. I knew you'd come. I have many questions for you, Harry Potter."

"Like what?" Potter spat, fists still clenched.

"Well," said Riddle, smiling pleasantly, "How is it that a baby with no extraordinary magical talent managed to defeat the greatest wizard of all time? How did you escape with nothing but a scar, while Lord Voldemort's powers were destroyed?"

There was an odd red gleam in his hungry eyes now. *Red*, Dobby had said, Tom Riddle's eyes had started to become red-

Draco knew those eyes.

For the first time in Draco's life, the word left his lips. "You're Voldemort."

Riddle was gracious enough not to leave Ron and Potter staring at him like he'd gone mad for very long. "Correct, young Malfoy. Perhaps a bit more clever than your vapid grandfather

after all. Yes, Harry Potter, Voldemort is my past, present and future..."

Riddle traced Potter's wand through the air, writing three shimmering words:

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE

Then he waved the wand once, and the letters of his name rearranged themselves:

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

"You see?" Riddle whispered. "It was a name I was already using at Hogwarts, to my most intimate friends only, of course. You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father's name for ever? I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin himself, through my mother's side? I, keep the name of a foul, common Muggle, who abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch-"

"What the hell," Draco complained, "It's not like it actually spells Lord Voldemort by itself, it has to be a sentence? It's not even a perfect anagram?"

Riddle gave him a vicious look before clearing his throat and turning back to Potter. "No, I would not have kept that Muggle name. I fashioned myself a new name, a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!"

Potter looked up and said with a voice like steel, "You're not."

"Not what?" snapped Riddle.

"Not the greatest sorcerer in the world," said Potter, breathing fast. "Sorry to disappoint you, and all that, but the greatest wizard in the world is Albus Dumbledore. Everyone says so. Even when you were strong, you didn't dare try and take over at Hogwarts. Dumbledore saw through you when you were at school and he still frightens you now, wherever you're hiding these days."

The smile had gone from Riddle's face, to be replaced by a very ugly look. Draco snorted. "Yeah," he called, "You think you scare me, Riddle, compared to *Dumbledore*?" It was actually true.

"Me either!" called Ron defiantly, before he got a befuddled look when he realized he'd just agreed to being scared of Dumbledore. "I mean- he's way scarier than you!"

"Dumbledore's been driven out of this castle by the mere memory of me!" Riddle hissed.

"He's not as gone as you might think!" Potter retorted, and those words of Dumbledore that Potter had repeated came to Draco's mind now, though he still could not puzzle out their meaning, and then Draco heard music.

Riddle froze and whirled around to stare down the empty chamber. The music was getting louder, and for a mad moment, Draco thought it was Severus, singing his tuneless healing song. But no, there was a melody to this song, and it pushed at Draco's heart with a hopefulness that did not feel native to himself. The vibration was a rumble through the whole Chamber, through Luna's body where it rested beside Draco, and slowly, shivering, Draco reached out to hold her cold hand.

A crimson bird the size of a swan had appeared, piping its weird music to the vaulted ceiling. It had a glittering golden tail as long as the peacocks at Malfoy Manor and gleaming golden talons longer than Draco's wand, talons that were gripping a ragged bundle.

A second later, the bird was flying straight at Potter. It dropped the ragged thing it was carrying at his feet, then landed heavily on his shoulder. As it folded its great wings, Harry looked up and saw it had a long, sharp golden beak and beady black eyes.

The bird stopped singing. It sat still and warm next to Potter's cheek, gazing steadily at Riddle. "That's a phoenix..." said Riddle, staring shrewdly back at it.

"Who could mistake you as anything but a future dark lord," Draco hissed, "With such peerless powers of observation?"

"Fawkes?" Potter breathed, and the bird's golden claws landed gently on Potter's shoulder.

"And that-" said Riddle, now eyeing the ragged thing that Fawkes had dropped, "That's the old school Sorting Hat." Ron picked it up and examined it just as doubtfully.

"Oh, bloody hell," Draco muttered. "I hate that thing. Hey, Riddle, when you kill us, could you be sure and take that glorified piece of felt with us?" Ron dropped it abruptly, taking Draco's weary jibe too seriously, and Potter picked it up instead, staring it over.

Riddle began to laugh again. He laughed so hard that the dark chamber rang with it, as though ten Riddles were laughing at once, and Merlin, Draco had never wanted to hear that laugh again. It was normally one reserved for when the Cruciatus curse contorted its victim's limbs into particularly novel or unlikely positions. "This is what Dumbledore sends his defender! A songbird and an old hat! Do you feel brave, Harry Potter? Do you feel safe now?"

"Do *you* feel safe now?" Ron shouted back, rather nonsensically, but it made Draco laugh.

Potter was silent, though, like he had an idea. At least, Draco hoped he did. Maybe Potter had a sword somewhere after all, or he knew the bird would bring it soon too.

"To business, Harry," said Riddle, still smiling broadly. "Twice- in your past, in my future- we have met. And twice I failed to kill you. How did you survive? Tell me everything. The longer you talk," he added softly, "The longer your friends stay alive."

Potter's glance swept calculatingly over the scene before him, and a strange sort of faith settled over Draco: *He's going to get us out of this. He can do this. I believe in him.*

"No one knows why you lost your powers when you attacked me," said Potter abruptly. "I don't know myself. But I know why you couldn't kill me. Because my mother died to save me. My common Muggleborn mother," he added, shaking with what looked like pure righteous anger. "She stopped you killing me. And I've seen the real you, I saw you last year. You're a wreck. You're barely alive. That's where all your power got you. You're in hiding. You're ugly, you're foul!"

Riddle's face contorted. Then he forced it into an awful smile. "So. Your mother died to save you. Yes, that's a powerful counter-charm. I can see now- there is nothing special about you, after all. I wondered, you see. Because there are strange likenesses between us, Harry Potter. Even you must have noticed. Both half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only two Parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since the great Slytherin himself. We even look something alike... But after all, it was merely a lucky chance that saved you from me. That's all I wanted to know."

It was wonderful to hear Voldemort be so completely wrong.

"Now, Harry, I'm going to teach you a little lesson. Let's match the powers of Lord Voldemort, heir of Salazar Slytherin, against famous Harry Potter, and the best weapons Dumbledore can give him."

He cast an amused eye over Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, then turned towards Ron, and Draco feared the worst. "Wait!" Draco called. "Wouldn't it be more fun to make his friends watch as he dies?" Ron gave him the dirtiest look, and Draco shrugged weakly at him.

"Very well," Riddle said, and gestured sweepingly over to Draco. "Go on, ginger worm. Join young Malfoy." Riddle lifted his wand, and a ring of blue fire came up around Draco, Ron, and Luna on all sides, a narrow circle with heat Draco could feel sweltering in the air beside him and making it look half-liquid with the smoke. Ron grabbed onto Draco, though he did not scream. Draco was the one to scream, but he felt justified, doubly so at Riddle's next words.

"Your friends will watch you fail, Harry Potter, and as the light fades from your pretty eyes, you will watch me slaughter them like livestock." He tilted his head at the circle of fire. "Well, the ginger one. He can die quickly. But Abraxas's grandson is interesting. There's rather something *about* you, Draco," Riddle drawled, giving Draco a look disturbingly like Voldemort had used to give Aunt Bella. "You're rather interesting. Pretty little Draco Malfoy. I think I'll take my *time* taking you apart-"

"Over my dead body!" Potter spat, clinging to the Sorting Hat.

Riddle smirked elegantly. "That is rather the idea." He stopped between the high pillars and looked up into the stone face of Slytherin, high above him in the half-darkness. He opened his mouth wide and hissed. Potter seemed to understand, by the fear growing on his face.

"Don't worry!" Draco yelled. "It's just a Basilisk! Giant spiders are way scarier than that! Hey, Riddle! Hagrid's monster is better than your monster!" He turned to Ron, one hand on Ron's with the other clammy but still clinging convulsively to Luna's cold one. "Oh, well. Guess *we're* rather useless."

"No we're not!" Ron yelled. "Harry, the thing hates roosters! Try making rooster noises!"

From the way Riddle nearly doubled over laughing, Draco had an embarrassed suspicion that might not fool a Basilisk.

Slytherin's gigantic stone face was moving, which hardly did anything to improve the already slightly shoddy craftsmanship. The mouth opened wider and wider, to make a huge black hole, and then something was stirring inside the statue's mouth. Something was slithering up from its depths, a dark and endless shape of shadow behind the ring of blue flame, and Ron cried out from how hard Draco clung to his hand then.

Potter was not making a great start on the Basilisk-slaying, even a biased observer would have to admit. He backed away until he hit the dark Chamber wall, and then the phoenix took flight. *He's getting the sword!* Draco thought, elation spreading through him, though Potter had to be feeling rather abandoned. There was a loud thud, like that large shadowy shape was advancing down from its awkward entrance, and Draco scrunched his eyes shut.

"I would look down if I were you," he hissed to Ron. "Not much point in Potter fighting for our lives if we just get ourselves killed gawping at the Basilisk first."

"Cock-a-doodle-doo!" Ron went unexpectedly. "Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

From the sound of the Basilisk's movement, it was not overly terrified by the rooster calls.

"It was worth a shot," Ron muttered, and squeezed Draco's hand.

Riddle made some hissing sounds which sounded very ominous.

"Don't worry, Ron," Draco hissed, "Potter's going to save us, I know he will. We'll all be fine. Even Lovegood- er, I mean, my cousin Luna..."

"That's easy for you to say," Ron whispered. "He wants to keep *you* alive, because apparently you're *pretty.* Why do all the monsters ending up wanting to spare you anyway?"

"Maybe they can sense the monstrousness of my heart?"

Draco heard the sound of footsteps, panting, Riddle's laughter, and he had never wanted to look at something so badly while knowing he shouldn't, except for Harry Potter...

There was smashing sounds, and more hissing, so loud it couldn't possibly be coming from Riddle or Potter. "I mean, at least it sounds like he's putting up a fight?" Ron said weakly, and poked at Draco. "And hey, think of it the other way around. *I* get a quick end. You'll probably have to be some kind of weird snakey sex slave before *you* get the sweet mercy of death."

The sounds of combat went on above them continually. Draco had to keep grabbing Ron and pulling him back when he felt signs that Ron was trying to look and see. "Not worth it, Ron," he hissed, "We can't help anyway, just wait."

Riddle was hissing madly in Parseltongue, that disturbingly compelling, melodic voice gone frantic with a panic that boded well. Maybe the phoenix had come back and given Potter the sword.

Draco couldn't decipher the sounds that went on then, his only focuses remaining in the world keeping Ron from looking up, and feeling whether Luna's pulse had stopped. The green flame kept them back from Potter and his epic-sounding battle, not that Draco could possibly have done much to help, without his wand or even with it. There was the sound of bird calls and cries, at least, which was the most encouraging. *Sword,* Draco willed manically, *Sword,* and heard Ron whimper.

"Hey, Ron," Draco whispered. "It sounds like the phoenix is back. It sounds like it's helping. Don't worry, he's gonna win!"

"How are you so sure?" Ron growled, sounding close to a nervous breakdown, and Draco wrapped his arms around him to try to calm him, sliding a hand back down to keep tracking the pulse at Luna's wrist.

Because I'm from the future. "Because if he beat *me* at Quidditch," Draco hissed grandiosely, "The greatest Seeker in the history of Slytherin House, Potter can do *anything.*"

There were more sounds of Riddle hissing, the bird, the beast, bodies hitting against the wall, and Potter could be in the process of dying right now, but as long as the tumult still went on around them, it meant he wasn't done fighting.

And then finally, there was a mighty smashing and slipping sound, and then a thunder like a mountain coming down. Draco dared at last to look up, and the Basilisk had crashed down to the ground before them, dead.

"I told you," Draco told Ron, as the green flames all fell away. "Come on, Hermione will-"

But there was still the sound of Riddle's voice, like killing the Basilisk hadn't killed him, and the eerie laughter of Voldemort echoing through the Chamber. "Stay with Luna!" Draco hissed, and began to edge around the side of the massive scaled corpse.

"You're dead, Harry Potter," said Riddle's voice from the other side of the creature. "Dead. Even Dumbledore's bird knows it. Do you see what he's doing, Potter? He's crying. I'm going to sit here and watch you die, Harry Potter. Take your time. I'm in no hurry. So ends the famous Harry Potter. Alone in the Chamber of Secrets, his friends crushed by a Basilisk, defeated at last by the Dark Lord he so unwisely challenged. You'll be back with your dear Mudblood mother soon, Harry... She bought you twelve years of borrowed time... but Lord Voldemort got you in the end, as you knew he must."

It was a very large corpse. Draco tried to move faster and nearly slipped in a pool of blood. When Potter killed things, he didn't take it halfway. He told himself Riddle was gloatingly

mistakenly, that in a moment Potter would do Riddle in and finish the job.

What was he going to do, sneak up behind Riddle and try to tackle him to the ground for their wands?

It wouldn't matter, of course. But even if Riddle had killed Potter, Draco was not going to go down quietly. He was Severus Snape's godson.

"Get away, bird," said Riddle's voice suddenly. "Get away from him. I said, get away!"

There was the sound of clattering on the ground, like Riddle had thrown down all their wands, or thrown two out of the way to wield just one. But right after there was a sound like a bang, of echoes and wings flapping, while all Draco could see was still the scales. "Phoenix tears," he heard Riddle say, "Of course... healing powers... I forgot..."

It was kind of Riddle to narrate for Draco's benefit. Especially after that burst of hope made Draco try to sprint the rest of the way to Potter, and slip in a larger pool of blood right on his face.

"But it makes no difference," Riddle went on. "In fact, I prefer it this way. Just you and me, Harry Potter... you and me..."

And then, a moment later, there was a scream, high, piercing, and inhuman. The rush of greater hope that went through Draco then was unfiltered with almost any doubt. Potter or the bird had hurt Riddle, it was clear, because that wasn't Potter's scream. Draco fell back where he lay in the pool of Basilisk blood and let out a shaky laugh. Finally, the scream ended, and there was silence.

Draco picked himself off the stone and rounded the end of the beast, finally, to the sight of the diary impaled through with a Basilisk fang, ink oozing out all over the stone like blood. There was sizzling from the pages where the fang had touched. Riddle was nowhere to be seen, like finishing the diary off had done the same for him, and that scream had been his death. Two wands, one bent and one straight, lay before the diary like some offering to it, the ink curling around leaving them untouched while it ran like a river to join the Basilisk's blood beyond it.

And Potter wasn't there either. Draco's heart stopped until he heard a sharp wet sound of metal, and turned to the front of the beast to see Harry covered in ink and blood, Sorting Hat under his arm with his wand back in his hand, pulling a sword back out of the mouth of the dead Basilisk.

I love him so much.

It had to be the insanity of the moment making Draco think such an impossible thing. But he thought it.

The blood glittered a darker red than the Gryffindor-red rubies on the hilt, pooling over Potter's pale hands, with the dead eyes of the Basilisk behind him already cut open. If Draco hadn't known Potter was everything everyone ever claimed and more, the kind of hero that

should only exist in foolish legends, he would have known it now. Not just by the sight of Potter before him, the great beast felled by that dripping sword, but by the look in those eyes, like he could see something no one else could. Potter's gaze was somewhere in another world, until it focused on Draco.

"Draco! Oh my God! Are you okay? You're covered in blood-"

Draco gave an awkward little wave, walking towards the savior of the Wizarding world covered in the blood of the Basilisk he'd slain. He was embarrassed to admit the cause of his own state. *You just slayed a Basilisk, and all I contributed was falling over.* "No, I'm not hurt at all, it's just from the Basilisk. A lot of blood came out."

"Is Ron alright?" Potter asked anxiously, and yelled, "Ron! It's dead! Riddle's dead! It's over!" Then he stepped up to Draco, watching him pocket the talon wand, and gripped Draco by the shoulders. "It isn't your blood? You'd tell me if it was? Draco, I was so scared something would happen to you, that Riddle would get you- but he's dead- when I stabbed the diary..."

Potter came up covered in sweat and dust and muck that made his brilliant green eyes all the more blinding, more ethereal than the phoenix. "And, um, I killed the Basilisk too. With a sword, did you see?"

Draco frowned. "Yes, Potter," he drawled, "Somehow that failed to escape my notice."

It was almost like Potter was waiting for Draco to tell him he was a hero.

Potter flushed and let the sword fall to his side. Draco wondered if he expected some kind of congratulations. He had no idea what to say. What could you ever say or do sufficient to requite what Potter had just done?

It wasn't enough that Potter had to slay Basilisks, he also had to *look* heroic even in that moment, and as unaware as a Flobberworm of that eerie otherworldliness. No wonder Draco had hated him so much back then. He even looked like a storybook hero, like something right out of a fairytale, the prince gone to save the fair maiden from the monster, triumphant. Except with a piece of the devil still as well, left hidden in him with that scar.

Draco had used to count Potter as his *rival*. As if he ever could have been a match for this.

"Guess you don't owe me a life debt anymore," Draco said lightly instead. "Ron, he's still on the hook."

"I still owe you too," Potter said awkwardly. "I'll never not owe you..."

"Thank you." Draco struggled for words. "If I had really been the Heir of Slytherin, I think you would have defeated me."

"I don't know about that," Potter laughed softly, "A Basilisk is one thing, but a dragon?"

He dropped the sword to reach out and entwine his bloody fingers with Draco's.

A second later, Ron's voice sounded out, and Potter dropped his hand.

"Harry! Draco! Are you alright? Bloody hell, Harry, what did you do? Did you defeat him?"

Ron raced over and started to pepper Potter with questions, once Draco had gone and taken the weight of Luna off his shoulder. She was still pale, but not like alabaster.

"What a strange place this is. Oh, hello, Draco. I've just heard that we're cousins. I never knew."

Basilisk Blood

Chapter Notes

Hey all! Thanks so much for all your thoughts! As for languages of comments, I speak English and Spanish, so comments in Spanish, Portuguese, or other romance languages are totally fine, I can understand them ^^

I envisioned Ron learning about sex slaves from those Mad Muggle comic books he reads. There is some crazy stuff in comic books lol... and speaking of which, the torn page thing is totally like Death Note :) That's one of my all-time favorite series, maybe that's an inspiration...

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the door to McGonagall's office opened, the first thing Draco saw was the symbol around Xenophilius Lovegood's neck: a triangle with a circle inside, and a line through that circle.

And then the man cried out "Luna!" and ran past Draco. He took hold of his daughter from where Ron and Potter were supporting her, seizing her in his arms. For a second, Draco expected a woman following with the same fervent relief, but then he remembered Riddle, saying Luna would talk to him about watching her mother die.

Draco stood there awkwardly beside Ron and Potter, covered in mud and slime and blood and ink, and perhaps a phoenix feather or two from when Fawkes had flown the four of them out of the pipe. He watched Luna and her father, wondering vaguely if the others would get suspicious if he didn't hug his 'uncle', and then he followed Potter's gaze to see Dumbledore had returned to Hogwarts. McGonagall was beside him, looking shaken by the sight of her returning students.

Xenophilius let Luna go, lowering her into a chair beside McGonagall, before turning tremblingly to the three bloodied boys. "Thank you. Thank you for saving my daughter. She's all I have left in this world."

"Oh, Father, calm down, please don't cry," Luna said softly, and reached out and tugged sweetly on her father's hand.

Xenophilius was not crying, but looked close. "How? How did you get her back?"

"I think we'd all like to know that," said McGonagall weakly.

Potter hesitated for a moment, then walked over to the desk and laid down the Sorting Hat, the ruby-encrusted sword, and what remained of Riddle's diary. And then all Draco had to do was take a seat beside Ron and pleasantly drift off, letting Potter tell everything. His ears only perked up when they got to the part about Aragog in the Forest, but when there was no mention of the Imperius curse, he settled back dozily in his chair.

"Very well," McGonagall prompted, "So you found out where the entrance was- breaking a hundred school rules into pieces along the way, I might add- but how on earth did you all get out of there alive, Potter?"

Potter went on until the point where he could not go any longer without implicating Luna. Draco wondered why Potter was looking at him of all people, until he remembered he had claimed he was her cousin. Well, they hadn't expelled Ginny Weasley...

"What interests me most," said Dumbledore gently, "Is how Lord Voldemort managed to enchant Luna, when my sources tell me he is currently in hiding in the forests of Albania."

"Enchant her?" Xenophilius asked fearfully, pulling Luna against his side. Tears had begun to spill silently down Luna's face, like she finally understood what she had done. "What has happened to my daughter?"

"It was this diary," said Potter quickly, picking it up and showing it to Dumbledore. "Riddle wrote it when he was a fifth-year."

Dumbledore took the diary from Harry and peered keenly down his long, crooked nose at its burnt soggy pages, then looked slowly over at Draco. "Fascinating. I had believed this destroyed."

"Apparently," a voice came dully from above, "I was mistaken."

"Severus!" Draco cried out, and flung himself over and hugged Severus for the second time in his life. He felt he deserved it after his relative bravery, and if Severus didn't appreciate being covered in Basilisk blood just this once, well, could he really keep calling himself a Slytherin?

"Draco," Severus said, pushing him back to stare in dismay. "I came as soon as I heard." His gaze traveled to stare balefully at Potter. "I see Mr. Potter has once again been getting you into *dangerous situations*." But his venom was short-lived, except towards himself, once he looked back at the diary. "A Basilisk, I have heard. I was as mistaken then as when I believed that thing destroyed. Is it truly now?"

"It is," Draco said eagerly, and hurried to tell Severus the story Riddle had told them.

"It regenerated somewhere else," Severus said, and shook his head. "This is my carelessness. I am entirely at fault. Headmaster, if you wish for me to tender my resignation..."

"Don't you dare," said Draco, and made to draw his wand.

"Or rather," Xenophilius interrupted, "My daughter must learn not to trust mysterious magical objects. I had thought I had educated her better than that." He stroked at Luna's matted wheat-silk hair and kissed her head. "I apologize on her behalf, Professor."

"I'm sorry," Luna said.

Severus picked up the diary and read the first page around the hole. "T.M. Riddle."

"Brilliant," Dumbledore said softly. "Of course, he was probably the most brilliant student Hogwarts has ever seen. Very few people know that Lord Voldemort was once called Tom Riddle. I taught him myself, fifty years ago, at Hogwarts. He disappeared after leaving the school... travelled far and wide... sank so deeply into the Dark Arts, consorted with the very worst of our kind, underwent so many dangerous, magical transformations, that when he resurfaced as Lord Voldemort, he was barely recognizable. Hardly anyone connected Lord Voldemort with the clever, handsome boy who was once Head Boy here."

Luna and her father both looked fascinated. "So that's Tom?" Luna asked, wiping at her eyes. "He was rather a strange boy. I'm sorry, Father, but I fell in love with him." She smiled up at her father, and then reached out and took Draco's hand. "I'm just lucky my cousin saved me."

Xenophilius Lovegood stared at him for a long moment. "I had never heard of ties of blood between our families."

What the hell. If Father could fabricate a relation between them and Salazar Slytherin, Draco could make one up that was actually worthwhile. "It's not like my family has ever really wanted to acknowledge it."

"Because you think you're a better sort than us, you mean."

"I don't think I'm better than anyone," Draco said, and then turned to Luna. "Luna, don't worry, it's not your fault..."

"Miss Lovegood should go up to the hospital wing straight away," Dumbledore announced. "This has been a terrible ordeal for her. There will be no punishment. Older and wiser wizards than she have been hoodwinked by Lord Voldemort." Draco could attest to that.

Dumbledore strode over to the door and opened it. "Bed rest and perhaps a large, steaming mug of hot chocolate. I always find that cheers me up," he added, twinkling kindly down at her. "You will find that Madam Pomfrey is still awake. She's just giving out Mandrake juice- I dare say the Basilisk's victims will be waking up any moment."

"So Hermione's okay!" said Ron brightly, and Draco let his head fall and eyes shut in the deepest relief he had ever known, even greater than when Voldemort had fallen.

"There has been no lasting harm done," said Dumbledore. At that, Xenophilius led his daughter out. Draco thought to call out and ask him about the symbol around his neck, but he forgot once Dumbledore turned to McGonagall and said, "You know, Minerva, I think all this merits a good feast. Might I ask you to go and alert the kitchens?"

"Right," said McGonagall crisply, also moving to the door. "I'll leave you to deal with Potter and Weasley, shall I?"

"Certainly," said Dumbledore, and Draco smiled at the smirk that put on Severus's face.

She left, and Potter and Ron gazed uncertainly at Dumbledore. "I seem to remember telling you both that I would have to expel you if you broke any more school rules," said Dumbledore. Ron opened his mouth in horror. "Which goes to show that the best of us must sometimes eat our words," Dumbledore went on, smiling. "You will both receive Special Awards for Services to the School and- let me see- yes, I think 200 points apiece for Gryffindor."

"*What*?" Severus barked, and whirled on Dumbledore.

There was the House Cup lost, then.

"And Mr. Malfoy, naturally, will also receive a Special Awards for Services to the School, and 200 points for Slytherin."

There was the House Cup still lost.

"This is outrageous!" Severus growled, turning to snarl at Potter in turn. "This foolish, arrogant boy drags *my godson* into needless peril yet again, violating every school rule, and in the process, Slytherin is the one punished-"

"Severus," Draco interrupted, grabbing at his sleeve. "Severus, he saved my life."

Severus stared down at Draco, then stalked out of the office without a word.

"Don't worry, Draco," Dumbledore said, and patted him on the shoulder. "I do believe that is Severus's way of saying how happy he is to see you return safely. Mr. Weasley, Mr. Malfoy, I will require a word alone with Mr. Potter before he may go."

"Thank you, Professor," said Ron, and led Draco out of the office. He laughed when Draco sat right on the floor, facing the door. "Are we waiting for Harry?"

"No," Draco said snottily, "Potter can do as he likes, I've thanked him more than enough already. My legs just need more of a rest before moving."

Ron let out a shuddering laugh, then let his head fall back against the wall. "Bloody hell, Draco, all the time in there, I kept thinking, what would have happened if you hadn't taken that diary away? Would that have been Ginny down there in the Chamber of Secrets?"

"There's no knowing," Draco lied. "It's not like I managed to-"

"*Thank you* is what I'm trying to say, you *git*," said Ron, and shoved him in the side, and then they both started to laugh.

"Thank you, Ron," Draco muttered. They both smelled like hell, and he didn't even care. He was just so, so relieved. "Thank you for keeping me calm while Potter fought the Basilisk."

"You kept *me* calm," Ron laughed, and a squeaky voice above them declared,

"Draco Malfoy is doing many great things!"

Ron jerked back, eyes wide like he'd never seen a house elf before- or at least, one talking to Draco, that was for sure. "Dobby!" Draco said excitedly. "Dobby, did McGonagall come to the kitchens and tell you?"

"Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter saved the school, she said! Dobby was so happy!"

"Hey, I was there too," Ron said with a grin. "You gonna introduce me or what?"

"Dobby, this is Ron Weasley, a friend of mine, and of Harry Potter," Draco said with an easy grin. Ron's gaze went to Draco, shocked at the use of the word friend, only to turn twice as shocked when Draco added, "Ron, this is Dobby, another friend of mine. He works in the Hogwarts kitchens. He used to work at Malfoy Manor before my father freed him."

Ron squinted up at Dobby. "A friend of Draco's? That's the first time he's ever even called *me* friend."

"Draco Malfoy likes to pretend he does not care," Dobby said sagely, "But Draco Malfoy is always caring very much more than he wants to. Draco Malfoy was very lonely when Harry Potter and his friends thought he was the Heir of Slytherin-"

"Dobby!" Draco hissed furiously. "Have you showed up to congratulate or embarrass me?" He held up a hand and Dobby stared at it. "Slap it. Give me a high five. What? It's a Muggle thing. Hermione's family taught it to me. It seems appropriate."

Dobby looked worried he would have to shove his head in the oven for it a couple times, but eventually, he leaned down and slapped Draco's palm. Ron followed suit, and then surprised Dobby by gently slapping his palm too.

"Are you why Hermione was checking out all those books on house elves at the start of the year?" Ron asked Dobby. "She thinks you all should be free, you know," and Draco leaned back against the wall, letting the two of them sink into a bizarrely natural discussion, until a familiar *tap* made his blood go cold.

"Draco Lucius Malfoy, what is the meaning of this?"

The others fell silent, Dobby instantly at the sound of that walking stick. Draco looked up to see Father looking down on the three of them, and then saw the scene through Father's eyes: his only son and heir covered in dried blood and filth, beside a boy similarly dirtied, but not enough to hide he was a Weasley. The one family Draco had promised to stay away from in their deal. Then there was Dobby, the house elf Father had freed for helping Draco defy his will. Hanging out there with Draco on a corridor floor, *chatting*.

"Father," Draco nodded. He put a hand on Ron's arm, to keep him from leaping up screaming obscenities over Father targeting his sister. "Come to congratulate me?"

"What?" Father breathed, and Draco smiled up brightly.

"I've received an award," Draco told him serenely, "For Special Services to the School."

Father stared at him for a moment of deranged bafflement, then seemed to decide Draco was beyond help. "What is this piece of *vermin* doing here?" It would have been hard to tell if he meant Ron or Dobby, had his gaze not turned towards the latter.

"Dobby," Draco said, "Is employed at Hogwarts."

"*Employed*," Father echoed, lip curling. "I knew this place was going to the dogs, but this is beyond the pale. No wonder Dumbledore was allowed to sneak back in unchecked after he had been removed. That will not stand for long." His gaze swept over them contemptuously. "Yes, we are due for more than a few changes around here." He looked towards the door, as if ready to stomp in, then looked twice at Draco and started. "What is that all over you? Is that *blood*?"

"Doesn't miss a trick, your father," Ron said quietly in Draco's ear. Draco bit his lip to keep from grinning. Since seeing Potter pull the sword from the Basilisk's mouth, he had been riding a high like he was untouchable, Malfoy Invincible, like catching the Snitch a hundred times in a row. Even Father's rage was unreal in comparison to Potter's victory.

"Is that *your* blood?" Father asked, momentum of fury faltering.

Draco shrugged elegantly. "Why do you think I'm on the ground?"

"*Do* something, creature!" Father hissed furiously, and was dragging Draco down the hall, around the corner from the others, in search of wounds, before Draco could tell him he was joking. "Where? Where are you hurt?"

"It was a joke, Father, I'm fine, none of it's my blood," Draco said shakily, and Father stared in his eyes long enough to wrench at Draco's heart, with that face he had used to venerate more than anything-

"We can change that," Father said coldly, and raised his walking stick. Draco ducked and drew his wand. They stared at each other for a long moment. Then Father stalked back around the corner.

"Draco, what did your father want?" Ron exclaimed. "Are you alright?"

Draco winced. "Come on, Dobby, I think you're going to want to see this."

He led Ron and Dobby in, where Father seemed to be raging at Dumbledore over his return.

"Well, you see, Lucius," said Dumbledore, smiling serenely, "The other eleven governors contacted me today. It was something like being caught in a hailstorm of owls, to tell the truth. They'd heard that Xenophilius Lovegood's daughter had been killed and wanted me back here at once. They seemed to think I was the best man for the job after all. Very strange tales they told me, too. Several of them seemed to think that you had threatened to curse their families if they didn’t agree to suspend me in the first place."

Draco stood by what he had told Riddle, about finding Dumbledore more intimidating. He had never seen Father that cowed by anyone other than Voldemort.

"So- have you stopped the attacks yet?" he sneered. "Have you caught the culprit?"

"We have," said Dumbledore, with a smile.

"Well?" Father said sharply. "Who is it?"

"The same person as last time, Lucius," said Dumbledore. "But you may be better served by asking that question of your son."

"My son," Father said violently, "Is not the Heir of Slytherin, whatever you prejudiced vermin have spread about him over the school, making his life hell! Why is my son covered in blood?"

It would have been a neat spin of events if it hadn't been so transparent. Potter caught sight of the three of them inching in the door and blinked at the uncommon sight of a house elf, while Dobby waved merrily at his beloved Harry Potter.

"What is *he* doing here?" He stared up at Father fiercely, and then climbed to his feet, stalking forward like an avenging angel.

"Mr. Potter," Father said frostily, "We meet again." His gaze traveled down, only to freeze at the sight of the sword hanging bloody from Potter's hand.

"The Sword of Gryffindor," Potter said sharply, and half-tossed the sword, loosening and tensing his grip again before it dropped. "Ever heard of it? Not as flashy as Slytherin's Basilisk. But it did the job."

"Lucius," Dumbledore said, "I am curious. Where did you happen to first meet Mr. Potter?"

"Borgin & Burkes," Potter said with a grim smile, and with the hand not holding a blood-stained sword, held up the diary before Father's face, showing him the hole seared into it. Then he held it out to Father, and Draco held his breath. "You can have your diary back if you like, Mr. Malfoy. It's of no use anymore."

Father looked much like he had in Azkaban in that moment, glancing between all of the objects in that office hostile to him, Dumbledore and Potter and a Weasley and a discarded house elf and a sword and ruined diary, and perhaps his own son too.

As Father's eyes came to rest on Draco, that was the question.

"Lucius," Dumbledore said calmly, "If you will not be wanting the diary back, I believe you have no further business at Hogwarts. A pleasure seeing you as always."

Father's eyes fastened not on Draco but Dobby. "You should know, *Headmaster*," Father said coolly, "That you are harboring unlawful elements in your midst. This... creature," he said, shuddering as if merely referencing Dobby's existence sullied his lips, "Was dismissed from my family's service. For endangering my son with dark magic, exposing him to a dangerous

wand whose possession has warped my son's magic, and it seems his *mind.* With him present here, you risk every one of your students to the same fate that nearly befell the Lovegood girl. But then what should I expect, from a man who has delighted from the beginning of his tenure in bringing disgrace to the name of Hogwarts?"

Ron drew himself up tall, and Draco could hear his father in his voice as he said, cool as ice, "Oh, I think we all have a different idea of what disgraces the name of Hogwarts, Mr. Malfoy."

Father looked down at Dobby and said softly, clearly meaning every word, "I should have not have freed you. I should have put an end to you then and buried you in an unmarked grave."

And Dobby drew himself up and shouted, "Lucius Malfoy is no good at punishments!"

It was fortunate for Father's sake that he left Hogwarts as quickly as he did, as he would hardly have approved of the feast that Dobby left after to help rustle up. Most everyone was in their pajamas, and after cleaning himself up, Draco didn't bother dressing all the way back up. He just slid on his cashmere slippers and his Slytherin-green silk pajamas, with the cashmere sweater Mother had given him on top. Father would have disowned him on the spot at the sight.

He was gratified he had not dressed up, though, when he saw Potter and Ron were coming into the Great Hall from the other end in their bright red pajamas and dressing gowns. He stopped at the threshold of the Entrance Hall, staring at that one slight red-clad form of Potter in the distance disappearing into a knot of congratulations, and then he heard a voice tentatively calling his name. "Draco? Oh, Draco, are you alright?"

Pansy was staring out in his direction from the Slytherin table, surprisingly pretty with her mussed hair and jade-green ribbons in her frilled nightgown. From the smile she gave him, it seemed the prospect of his impending death had made her forgive him at last.

"Hello, fellow Slytherins," Draco said loftily. He strode up with his best swagger to the table, electing between bragging about his award or the 200 points he'd won for Slytherin. But a glance at the House Cups out of the corner of his eye, with Gryffindor's now-towering lead, told him it was best not to bring points up at all.

"I regret to inform you all that despite popular rumor, I was not the Heir of Slytherin, and in fact was integral to the accomplishment of the real Heir's demise. You may all finish out the school year and the years ahead, comfortable in the knowledge that one of your own has protected you from the terrible threat that imperiled you all-"

"We're purebloods, Draco, none of *us* were in danger," Blaise interrupted, and Draco serenely ignored him.

"I will be accepting all of your apologies for persisting in the belief that I was behind the heinous attacks on our school. I can understand the confusion, given my exceptionally high level of magical prowess, but rest assured that were I to assert myself with dark magic within

the halls of Hogwarts, I would do so with narrower focus, to *my* benefit. Have I made myself clear, children?"

"Oh, do shut up," said Blaise, and hauled him into a hug between him and Theo, with the others reaching over and clasping Draco on the shoulders. "We're slightly gratified you're not dead, you great blowhard. Now shut your mouth and have some pie."

Draco thought he may never have been happier, before he cut into a piece of his own miniature meat pie, his favorite minced flavor with mint like back at the Manor, and saw written on a small enchanted piece of paper:

Draco Malfoy must eat well and finish this whole pie!

-A friend in the kitchens

Draco smiled down at the paper and pocketed it, only to hear a small uproar coming from the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables, as from the marble stairs descended two slight, long-haired figures, one taller and sleeker, and one with a bushy brown halo of hair-

"HERMIONE!" Draco screamed, and practically shoved Longbottom into Parvati Patil's lap in his mad dash to rush over to her.

She was just as hysterically loud and happy in his ear as she squealed, "You solved it! You solved it!" She shrieked the same to Ron and Potter as they came up, embracing them in turn, and when Draco saw the turquoise charm bracelet on her wrist, the sight of the H charm gave him a brief flash of disquiet, but in the end, Draco wasn't infallible. Anyone could mess up a tracking charm.

"I'm sorry," Draco tried to tell her, and she frowned and shoved him in the chest.

"The only apology I want to hear," she told him excitedly, "Is from Ron and Harry, for thinking you were the Heir all along! I mean, *honestly!* Will you admit I was right now, *boys*?"

Ron looked vaguely queasy, and mumbled something that could have been generously mistaken for an apology to Hermione, but Potter just looked alarmed. "Wait. This doesn't mean I have to wear a Slytherin uniform again, do I?"

"Oh, don't worry, Potter, there wasn't any formal bet," Draco drawled, pathetically eager to have Potter's gaze turn to him even now. "Even though you did look *fetching* as a Slytherin."

"Nothing has changed, has it," Hermione said to Ron contentedly, and threw an arm around Draco and Ron's shoulders. "Come on, boys. I'm hungry."

Draco winced. "I should go back to my own table. No one wants me at Gryffindor-"

"That's not true," she said fiercely. "You saved the school, Draco-"

"I mean, honestly, my major contribution was just keeping Ron from getting himself killed by staring moonily at the Basilisk," Draco shrugged, enjoying the elbow he got in return, only to start when he felt a hand brush his, just for a moment.

"You were so brave," Potter said admiringly. Draco meant to say a smart comeback, but just ended up staring at Potter until Ron pulled him away.

Draco snagged Hermione's arm for a final word. "I should sit with the Slytherins," he told her, "But I want us to visit each other again this summer, and I honestly couldn't give a knut what my father thinks of that."

"Oh, *Draco*," she said, and hugged him again, sniffling into his shoulder. "We'll all go see Arsenal at Highbury."

Draco didn't think he could get any happier, even after he finished Dobby's whole pie, and even after McGonagall announced exams had been cancelled as a school treat. Except then around half past three Hagrid came striding in, looking none the worse for wear, with a rather bedraggled but still recognizably spiky stuffed dragon under his arm. And Dumbledore announced that Lockhart had left a note that he had been suddenly called away on urgent business in Zanzibar, and needed to resign his position immediately. Read, Draco supposed, that he had fled the country posthaste, rather than be unmasked as a fraud in the wake of abandoning Hogwarts in its hour of need.

It had Draco reflecting on the blue loop. He remembered Lockhart losing his memory and ending up permanently in St. Mungo's last time, and now the man was presumably on the run but intact- well, as intact as Lockhart had ever been. Had Draco really saved Gilderoy Lockhart from his fate?

If he had, he could not begrudge the gilded peacock his escape, knowing that Lockhart and Draco had held something unexpected and very rare in common: a great esteem for Severus Snape. Even if Severus up there at the high table had never had any idea of Lockhart's affection, the man had loved Severus, and Draco had to feel some gratitude to have rescued a mind capable of that.

In any event, Lockhart and his unrequited love had left the building. Much to the joy of Hogwarts. Even Hermione stood up to cheer, though all the way across the Great Hall, Draco could still detect a bit of a sullen pout on her face as she sat back down.

Luna Lovegood did not make an appearance during the feast, which cast the one shadow over it all. But she appeared the next day at the entrance to the Slytherin dungeons, asking a baffled Vince if her cousin was inside.

And the happiest day was yet to come: the day Draco went to Severus's rooms and found the wards let him in, recognizing him as Severus's godson.

Mother sent a letter saying Father had been sacked as school governor. Draco rejoiced in the news along with Dobby and the Gryffindors, agreeing with them that Father could have

expected no less when he'd threatened the board's families. He chose to keep his other opinion, that Father would have been better off risking using the Imperius curse, all to himself.

He amused Hermione by complaining about her not receiving a Special Award like the boys had, given the role her research had played in uncovering the mystery. But she seemed philosophical about the whole thing. "Oh, it's a fine thing Ron and Harry got this extra award," she said smugly. "It can console them for how many more OWLs I'm going to get than them."

Draco frowned. "What about me? I got an award, and I'm going to get lots of OWLs too."

Hermione smirked. "Not as many as me. I'm taking *all* the electives next year."

Draco didn't ride in the train compartment with Potter, Hermione, and their excess of Weasleys, where Filibuster Fireworks and all sorts of nauseating Gryffindor things seemed to be unfolding. He went straight to the back of the train to join Luna Lovegood, who spent the trip beside her new cousin telling him rather fascinating stories, about her brief but unforgettable time with her onetime soulmate, Tom Riddle.

The Gryffindors caught up to Draco as they were exiting the Hogwarts Express, and Draco fell into step with Hermione, to go back through the barrier together. She linked her arm with his and tried to give him a bit of parchment, which he happily took until she told him it was from Potter. "It's for you," she said. "It's a telephone number. He says after you spent a week with me and my parents, you should know how to work a telephone. He wants us all to call him up, because he can't stand just having those awful relatives of his to speak to. Draco, you should consider it-"

Draco detached from Hermione to stalk over to Potter. "Harry Potter," Draco said harshly, while Ron held up his own piece of paper and smirked behind it. "What is this nonsense about expecting me to call you on this Muggle *telly-phone*? Just because you're the almighty slayer of Basilisks does not mean a Malfoy would lower himself to-"

"It's not like you ever write me any letters," Potter interrupted, practically whining.

Hermione caught Ron's eye over Draco's shoulder. Ron wheeled past them, and he and Hermione went through the barrier together, leaving them behind. Rather than follow, Draco had to face this comically needy version of Potter.

"Potter," Draco said. "What is this I hear? Could it be the savior of the wizarding world begging for my attention?"

Potter's cheeks turned a scarlet color Draco knew he would miss over the months to come. "Don't flatter yourself. It would just do the Muggles I live with some good to see some contact with you over the summer. They're terrified of you."

"As they should be," Draco said, and preened with satisfaction.

Potter was staring at him, even when Draco turned to push their trolleys through the brick. "Potter, we *are* getting in the way of passerby. Even saving the school can only buy you so much goodwill before the first-year Hufflepuffs begin the stampede."

Potter pulled him aside, face still flushed, and Draco drank in the sight of those green eyes fixed on his one more time. "You *will* write to me this time, won't you?" Potter pressed. "I'm worried about *you* with your father. I'm not letting you go until you promise."

"Okay," Draco said, knowing he shouldn't agree, but said it nonetheless. "No need to beg any further, Chosen One, this is getting embarrassing. Now, come on, then. I believe I have some Muggles to terrify for you."

"Can't wait," said Potter, and with a great sprint, Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter went through the bricks and left Platform 9 and 3/4 at the same time.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, everyone! It's been a lot of fun! I'll be starting up the next part the day after tomorrow, with the same posting schedule. I'm really excited for the third book! :) Coming up next... Draco Malfoy and the House of Black!

Works inspired by this one

Draco Malfoy and the Heir of Slytherin by Emrys_Seren

[ART] Draco and Imoogi by reliand

[ART] The Golden Rose by reliand

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